The Shinzahou Chronicles Vol1: Densetsu no Hikari

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Complete

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Summary

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Description

Hikari's life sucks, and its about to get worse. As the Emperor of Kutou seeks to bring peace to his shattered land, Miaka's daughter finds herself dragged into the ShijinTenchishou. Hikari knows nothing about her parents' past, and she's more interested in going home than saving Kounan. However, in a wasteland of corpses, is there even the slightest shred of hope for salvation?

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer: The Shinzahou Chronicles

"Darkness cannot exist within light."
(Sukunami Taka, Eikouden animated series)

I'm sure every man and his dog has probably fixed on *Sukunami Hikari*as the focus of fanfiction, and for that reason I was loath to do much with her to begin with. After all, she is a literal blank slate in canon terms. However, in the end, there seemed to be so many possibilities that I buckled and gave in to myself… with the self-set challenge of writing a story in which the girl in question steers well clear of the mary-sue trap.

(As a rule, I'm too cruel to my characters to mary-sue them — but there's always a first time…)

So here we are. The Shinzahou Chronicles.

My slight caveat is that although I own and have read some of the novels, Eikouden is (are) not among them. I have only had the animated episodes to refer to, and to be quite honest, I'm pretty sure at times I'm contradicting things in that, too. I know that the implication is in the animated Eikouden that Chichiri and Tasuki haven't seen each other in a long time, and that Chichiri's spent the ten year gap travelling. Artistic licence comes into play here — though I've taken a lot of Eikouden principles for my continuity, those are things which I have amended. Basically this is because the events in this story have a chronological connection to the events/ending of *Shichikon Den*. (I'll say no more on that subject, though any readers of both will realise what I mean as soon as they finish the prologue…)

Yes, the four dead Seishi are still dead. . Or rather, they're in their reborn forms (Reishun, Eian, etc) although I've not decided whether or not to use them yet. Tasuki, Chichiri, Miaka and Tamahome are still very much alive and kicking however ;) and will play a part in this story

However, there are a lot of interesting possibilities in the Shijin-Tenchishou for a new legend — a Miko-free legend — and as Suzaku no Shinzahou, Hikari is a perfect target for them to rotate around.

I'm not sure how many Chronicles Hikari's story will extend

through at the moment. Five, I think. I have a lot of ideas but no real concept of chronology for them at present — so I guess we'll see…

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The Meihi tribe, their language and appearance are entirely of my creation also, and ditto goes for them in terms of fan-fiction re-production.

第一巻：伝説の光
Volume One: Densetsu no Hikari

Almost sixteen years have passed since Mayou and Taka last left the Shijin-Tenchishou, believing that peace had finally come to Kounan and that the legend was over once and for all. For sixteen years, the world of the book and the real world have remained separate, and in a small apartment in a Tokyo suburb, a young girl has grown up completely oblivious to the fact that before she was born, her presence helped save people she doesn't even know exist.

But she's about to learn, fast.

As much as Hikari is sure life isn't fair in the real world, it's about to become ten times tougher when, after a violent argument with her father she finds herself in the Restricted section of the National Library. With a flash of red light, she is transported into the world of the book — but the world she sees is devoid of all life — an abandoned shell of what was, once, a thriving southern state.

Believing she's trapped in some kind of strange dream, Hikari is horrified to discover the sleeping skeletons of people long dead within one of the abandoned houses… what is this place, and how can she wake up? But her adventures are only just beginning, for Suzaku's light draws her back to the world of the SuzakuShichi Seishi and, with a horrified jerk, she realises that not only is this not a dream but that her presence in the Shijin-Tenchishou might be the only thing that can save everyone from disaster.

In the Eastern territories, a desperate Emperor has begun to set in motion the wheels of the world's destruction, surrounded by the impassive former slave Hyoushin and the clever priest Kikei as he struggles to bring peace to his war-shattered land. Long-dormant magic is being awoken, and in the midst of this, a young soldier begins to discover that he is more

entwined with the fate of his country and its magic than he ever imagined.

As Kutou's Emperor seeks to locate holy relics of the Azure Dragon, Chichiri realises that Hikari's appearance in the book world is not a coincidence — and that the power of Suzaku no Shinzahou may once more be required to bring peace to not only the south but the entire plane of existance

But right now Hikari's main concern is finding a bath and getting the hell out of this world without television or electricity in time to go to her friend's party.

The people of Kounan are doomed…

Prologue

Kutou
The Royal Palace

So, another dead end.

The man sat back on his heels, gazing at the floor with a mixture of frustration and resignation.

"No matter how hard I pray, I can't come to find him." He whispered, getting slowly to his feet as he extinguished the torches in the chamber one by one before withdrawing from the darkness and swinging the doors shut behind him. In the blackness, the tarnished figure of a golden dragon glinted briefly in the glow of the outer hall, but it was gone in an instant, and the young man sighed, shaking his head.

"Seiryuu can only be summoned with the contribution of a Miko and the seven Seishi." He murmured. "But the Seiryuu Shichi Seishi are dead. The Miko has gone. And Kutou… Kutou…"

He faltered, remembering the report he had received only that afternoon, of a civil uprising not more than ten miles from the Kutou capital city. It had been this story for far too long, he mused bitterly, as he moved swiftly and silently through the halls of what had once been Kutou's hallowed royal palace, but which had become, over time, little more than a glorified military barracks for the army-controlled government that attempted to keep order. Since the war against Kounan, any vague semblance of stability had crumbled and many of the tribes and peoples that the former regime had annexed had seized their chance to break free, having taken the warning of the Hin slaughter as a sign that if they did not act, they might not live to regret it.

In this world, Kintsusei had grown, the son of the former Emperor and yet, in so many ways, the opposite. A child born of a concubine and never recognised by the man who had ruled over the Eastern lands, he had grown up estranged and alienated from the royal court, and this alone had preserved him from the massacre that was to follow. As a boy he had sought only one thing — to be able to protect and heal the country his father had spent so long wounding, and to that end, he had become a soldier in the army at only fifteen — another unknown, shifting among the ranks governed by the fair haired, blue eyed Hin known to all and sundry under the Celestial name of “Nakago”.

At the memory of the former Shougun, a faint, melancholic smile touched Kintsusei’s lips. Some people called him a devil, but to the young Prince he was an angel of retribution, brought to avenge all the evils his debauched, perverted father had wreaked on his unfortunate people. While the Emperor had lived in luxury, abusing both his concubines and his manservants alike, Nakago had taken control, and ruthlessly, decisively rid the palace of the entire corrupt government in one fell swoop.

Kintsusei had been present, when the event had taken place. It still lived with him now, how the great man, fair hair flying and blue eyes cold as ice, had vaporised the former Emperor as if he had been nothing more than dust.

And the son had watched, as his father had died, and had felt nothing but relief that maybe now, Kutou could finally be saved.

But Nakago had left Kutou, and he had not come back. He had been slain in battle, fighting against Kounan’s forces in some unknown, alien land and Kintsusei had not seen him again. Without his strong guidance, Kutou’s fragile military status had collapsed, and the country had suffered nothing but torment since. Kintsusei regretted bitterly that he had not been there to fight — even die — to defend the Shougun’s life. Nakago had been, in the end, the only one strong or brave enough to challenge the existing hierarchy of power. And though he had dispatched so many people with so little emotion, he had always commanded his men with honour and conviction — in a way that Kintsusei dearly wished to emulate himself.

“I am Emperor of Kutou.” He murmured, glancing at his hands as he did so. “By default, as the only blood survivor of my father’s tainted family line. But even so, I don’t feel that way, and I will not take an Imperial name so long as that’s the case. I feel… more like a Shougun, not a King, even if I am expected to rule here. I am a soldier,

not a Prince. That's just how I've always been — my father made it that way, and I will not be the kind of failure he was. I will somehow find the power to do what Nakago was killed trying to do — to unite the four lands must surely, finally bring everyone to peace? If we are all one nation — all under one governing class — then there is no dissention, no cause to fight. And there will be no more need for civil unrest. Kutou's wounds run deep, but if I can unite this land with its brothers, surely… surely I can heal those wounds."

He sighed, gazing up at the sky, where the stars that marked out Seiryuu's seven constellations glittered overhead.

"What would you have me do, Shougun?" He murmured. "What would you do… if you were here? You never feared anything — and me, I fear so much. There is so much uncertainty, that I don't even know who I can trust within my own council. Assassins may be lurking around every corner… and I must be strong and decisive. I must not let this country fall into any more disrepair than it already has. I will achieve it, somehow — I will do what you and your Seishi brethren died trying to do. I will save Kutou — *you have my word*!"

Kounan
The Eastern Village

A gentle breeze blew through the southern lands as the lone figure stood, staring out across the landscape, lost in thought. Around him, the sound of children laughing and playing went unnoticed, as the village children enjoyed the sunshine that so often touched the Kounan countryside. A land more contrary to the war-torn Kutou could not be found, for since the coming of the Miko, Kounan had gained the stability its struggling neighbour still sought to claw back, and for many of the younger village members, there had never been any other way than the peaceful, gentle existance of daily community life.

As he stood there, taking it all in, noone paid him any heed. He was, after all, an enigmatic, unique kind of man, and his ways and behaviours were now so normal to his neighbours that noone even batted an eyelid. Even in his simple, rural attire, it was impossible for him to completely blend in, for although the red mark of Suzaku that adorned his knee was very rarely, if ever seen these days, the cruel, winding scar across his left eye told of a past steeped in tragedy and pain. And yet, even the youngest village children did not fear him, for it was well known in the surrounding mountain area that there were few men with as kind or even a heart than Ri Hou Jun.

At length he frowned, breaking his reverie as he contemplated what it was that had attracted his attention that morning. The sensation had been fleeting, yet vivid and compelling, and something about it had set his spiritual senses on edge.

“Almost as if… something was coming.” He mused, more than half to himself as he made his way slowly back towards the comfortable structure that had been his home from home for some years. Built on the ruins of a charred out farmstead, it now stood in the centre of a modest, if richly fertile estate, the ash and destruction of the fire years earlier having given new life to the soil around the whole area. Herbs of all varieties grew in the resultant lots, as he had drawn on the knowledge and memory of a lost, dear friend, seeking, as ever, to heal the wounds of those around him. That, he remembered, had been the initial drive to rebuild the burnt village, and in time the once abandoned land had become populated again, people drawn by the promise of cheap, good land and the potential shelter of Reikaku-zan’s legendary bandits. Though there was no official local authority, Hou Jun knew that his Suzaku calling meant that he had unconsciously assumed the position of village elder, and that, through his connections to the mountain bandits, the people in the Eastern Village lived in peace and security, safe from external attack

“But then, what I felt just now… what was it? That’s the question. It’s been so long — are we going to have to fight again, so soon, when everything seems so much at peace?”

“Are you talking to yourself again?”

A droll voice interrupted his train of thought and he turned, a rueful look flickering in his good eye as he registered the speaker. She was flame haired, with well-defined features and a firm chin that told of a strong, resolute character beneath her striking appearance. Her bronze eyes flickered with amusement, and to all appearances she seemed like an average, gentle village woman, but Hou Jun knew that, should anyone cross her or dare to hurt her family, she would be a more formidable foe than any man, swift and unafraid with her fists as much as with her sharp tongue.

It was an interesting combination, he reflected now, his calm coupled with her fire, and yet, over the course of the past several years, their bond had strengthened into something that very little would ever be able to break down. Though she could frighten some of her burlier male neighbours, she had never yet frightened him, and he offered her a smile as he moved across to speak to her.

“That depends on whether anyone else was listening, you know.”

He said lightly, and she shook her head in obvious resignation.

“You have an answer for everything, as always.” She reflected with a sigh. “So what is it this time? Something on the wind? Some kind of evil spirit about to shoot out of the mountain to eat us all? You might as well tell me now, because I know what it will mean — as it ever does. You traipsing off into the wilderness with that idiot brother of mine, looking for trouble.”

Hou Jun eyed his companion for a moment. Then he laughed, shaking his head as he held out his hands to hers.

“You have known me for far too long, Aidou.” He said softly. “But I’m not going anywhere, not at the moment. Since Suzaku was last summoned, and since Reikaku-zan and everything else in Kounan was restored to its proper state, everything has been quiet. But… I don’t know. I thought I sensed something, that’s all. I can’t place what… and I don’t even know that it’s danger. Just that something is going to… happen. A wind of change, if you like, blowing in from the East.”

“More like the scent of war.” Aidou said pragmatically, taking him by the hand and leading him inside the house, shutting the door behind her. “The East is far enough away, and nothing to do with you, even if you do have Suzaku’s mark. You don’t have to save Kutou too, you know — you’re only a warrior for Kounan, and not even that these past six years. I realise that this… this anxious rabbit behaviour is part of the man I married, however…”

She paused, eying him meaningfully, and Hou Jun held up his hands in mock surrender.

“I did say I wasn’t going anywhere.” He reminded her mildly. “Not at present, anyway. It’s just…”

He shrugged, then bent to roll up the leg of his trousers, pursing his lips as he took in the vivid red slashes that marked out the Suzaku character on his knee.

“I didn’t actively make it appear… but something sparked my power inside of me.” He admitted. “It just made me think, that’s all. That something’s happening.”

Aidou sighed.

“Then I suppose you will be going to see Shun’u next, won’t you?” She asked. “And seeing whether or not he’s noticed anything. Which,by the way, he won’t have… because he’s still as much of an idiot now as he was the last time you fought for Suzaku.”

“There’s no need for me to go to the mountain right now.” Hou Jun shook his head, rolling down the fabric as he did so. “Like I said, it’s a vague sensation at the moment. I’ll need to have more to tell him, before I start causing trouble for him on Reikaku-zan.”

He grinned sheepishly.

“Even after all this time, my senses are still pretty sharp, you know.” he reflected. “Taiitsukun said we’d always have those things, even if we didn’t always need to use them. And it is true. It’s all still there… just in case.”

“I suppose that’s just what I get for marrying a Suzaku Seishi.” Aidou rested her chin in her hands, but the glimmer of affection in her eyes belied her brisk tones. “You’re still Suzaku’s man, even though you’re mine.”

“A one eyed Suzaku sacrifice, perhaps.” Hou Jun’s eye glittered with amusement, his lips twitching into a grin as he saw his companion’s face flush red at his words.

“Shut up.” She ordered. “I haven’t called you that since the last time you decided to take off around Kounan putting people’s lives back together — and with good reason, too, since whenever you become Chichiri, you almost get yourself killed. Don’t bring back words to taunt me now — I was worried about you, that’s all. I don’t like it when you go away to fight — you know that. I don’t want you to not come back, so whatever this is, it had better stay a random feeling and nothing more than that. You have responsibilities here, you know, and this village — didn’t we rebuild this village as a permanent place to live?”

“Oh, Aidou.” Hou Jun’s gaze softened, and he shook his head. “Listen. I’ll always come back here, you know — no matter what I have to do for Kounan. You… this place… this is my home. My roots are here, and they’ll always bring me back. Didn’t I promise you that, when we first began to rebuild this place?”

“You did.” Aidou agreed quietly. “But it’s hard for a woman, when her husband goes off to war. And not just on her, either.”

Her gaze flitted across the room, to where a small girl was curled up on a vividly patterned stretch of fabric that had, in times of conflict been an enchanted *kesa*, scraps of paper spread out around her as she studiously copied out a sequence of characters time and time again. At her side, a boy of maybe four years her senior kept a close eye on her work, occasionally correcting her scribings with all the authoritative knowledge of a well-meaning twelve year old. Despite himself, Hou

Jun laughed at the scene.

“I won’t be abandoning them either.” He said quietly, shaking his head. “You know me, Aidou. Do I lie to you? I won’t put myself in any danger if it can be prevented. Suzaku No Miko won’t come back to Kounan, anyway… so you shouldn’t start to worry before you have to. I’m staying put for now. Really.”

“Really.” Aidou echoed, eying him pensively for a moment. Then she nodded, shrugging her shoulders.

“All right.” She relented. “I know you mean it, anyway, even if it doesn’t work out that way.”

“Papa? Papa, I wrote it right this time.”

As if sensing his gaze on her, the small girl scrambled to her feet, pushing her brother aside as she hurried forward clutching her scrap of paper, reddish eyes glowing with pride as she thrust it forward into Hou Jun’s hands. A strange sensation stirred in his heart as he took it, glancing at it, and then down at the eager, hopeful young maiden who stood gazing up at his scarred face with not even the slightest hint of fear. His smile widened, and gently he ruffled his fingers through her dark copperish hair.

“You’ve been practicing.” He said softly, running his gaze once more over the characters on the sheet before setting it aside. “You’ve remembered well everything I’ve taught you, Mei-chan.”

The girl beamed.

“I’m going to practice some more.” She said importantly. “So then I can write long things, like you can.”

With that she skipped off across the room, back to where her brother had lost interest in the writing lesson, turning his attention instead to sharpening the blade of his knife.

“You know, its all very well, teaching them to read and write so young, but there are a thousand other things Meikyo and I could be doing right now that would be much more useful to her and to me.” Aidou reflected. “I don’t wholly understand your obsession with words, to be quite honest. Granted, Eiju might have use for them as he gets older, if he’s going to work in the city, but there’s still the farm to think about, when all’s said and done — writing won’t tend the herbs. Besides, she might be small for her age, but Mei-chan is pretty enough even now and one day someone will want to take her for a wife. She won’t be much use to them if she doesn’t know how to do anything but ink characters on bits of parchment!”

“Well, I don’t see why she shouldn’t learn, you know.” Hou Jun said evenly, a smile on his face as they crossed familiar territory. “It won’t hurt her. And if you have chores that need doing, I can help you with those. Let the girl write, if it makes her happy.”

He glanced back down at the roughly scrawled characters, and his eyes glittered with pensive emotion.

“Suzaku Shichi Seishi.” He murmured, reading her clumsy words out loud, then, underneath, two characters that he knew only too well. He smiled, nodding his head as once again the sensation stirred deep in his soul.

“Chichiri.” He breathed.

Chapter 2

Chapter One

Another end to another boring, unproductive day.

Sukunami Hikari pulled her bag more firmly onto her shoulder, casting a dark gaze up at the grey clouds that had begun to mass overhead. It looked very much like it was going to rain again, and she had forgotten her umbrella in her rush that morning — for the second time that week, in fact, it looked like she was going to get soaked.

"Typical." She muttered, kicking at a stray pebble as she watched it skim across the footpath and into the gutter of a busy road. "And I still have to explain to Mother and Father why I got such a bad grade on Monday's test, too… I wonder what excuse I can use this time. It would be all right, except I know I fell asleep during the middle of it — but school is just so boring, and I'm really not cut out for studying. Not like Makoto."

Her heart flickered with a brief moment of resentment as she pictured her younger brother, whose natural study skills and blatant intelligence had already attracted the attention of several family members. Then she sighed, pushing the thought away.

"I almost wish they'd yell at me or something. At least then I'd know they were cross." She reasoned. "But Mother will just look at me, smile and say, 'never mind.' And Father… Father won't say anything, he'll just nod and change the subject. I hate that. It's like… like they don't even care if I pass or if I fail. If I get into a good school or if I don't… they don't seem bothered. Maybe it's because they think I'm a lost cause, or maybe it's because Makoto is always going to run rings around me no matter what I do. But it would be nice if, just for once, they bothered to react. Just so that I know they're really taking it all in."

"You look like the weight of the world's on your shoulders, Hi-chan."

A voice from up ahead startled her and she paused, raising her gaze to meet the teasing one of her closest friends, Kobayashi Arina. Bright eyed and mischievous, Arina was popular among many of her classmates, and a born leader among them, with her pretty features and her cheerful, decisive attitude to life. Hikari had been drawn to

her the first day they had met, when they had crossed paths in the hall of their middle school, and since then they had been almost inseparable. At her friend's surprise now, Arina grinned, holding out her hands.

"Earth to space cadet." She teased. "What are you looking like a thunderstorm for, anyway? Don't tell me you're seriously worried about your test score — Hi-chan, that really isn't like you. You know your parents aren't going to care, so why do you?"

Hikari stared at her for a moment, the a smile touched her lips.

"You make it sound so completely stupid." She admitted. "I guess it's just been one of those days."

"Sometimes I think you only smile when the sun is shining." Arina teased lightly, slipping her hand into her friend's and pulling her along the pathway. "But that means it's my duty to cheer you up, isn't it?"

"Where are we going?" Hikari cast her companion a startled look, as Arina gave her a tug, yanking her off the path that led to the apartment building she and her family had lived in her whole life and taking a new direction towards the local shopping centre, which was already buzzing with people young and old alike. "Arina, I don't have any money to go shopping — for a start, we've been at school, and for a second thing, I don't get any money from Mother or Father till the end of the month. That's two weeks away — I can't buy anything."

"So, we'll window shop." Arina seemed unmoved. "Though you really need to talk to your Dad about how stingy he is. The amount he gives you is barely enough for a kid to survive on for a week or two, let alone a month — you really should take him to task over it."

"Dad believes in teaching the value of money." Hikari pulled a face. "And besides, he just says that we can't afford it. Whenever I bring it up, he says I'll have to get a job and make up the difference, when I can. He really isn't easy to move on that subject — and Mother just laughs at him and tells him that money's not that important when we have one another… It's a lost cause, Ari. I've tried before, you know I have."

"I know. But it still sucks." Arina shrugged her shoulders. "I'd hate that kind of curb on my spending."

Hikari eyed her friend for a moment, and Arina grinned.

"Hey, that's what a Dad's there for, right?" She asked playfully. "To pay for his daughter's whims?"

"*Your* Dad, maybe." Hikari shook her head emphatically. "Mine… not on the same page."

"Oh well." Arina shrugged again. "Then I guess we really will be window shopping."

"I'm in no hurry to get home, I suppose." Hikari acknowledged, submitting herself to her friend's impulsiveness — as she so often did, when Arina was in this kind of a mood. "All right. I guess I can plan what I'm going to spend my money on -when I finally have some to spend."

"That's more like it." Arina looked approving, dimpling as she guided her friend in through the big double glass doors of the shopping mall. "A little retail therapy never hurt anyone."

"It's busy tonight. Guess everyone thinks there's a storm coming." Hikari mused, gazing around her. Arina nodded.

"Guess so." She agreed, slipping a stray wisp of dark hair behind her ear. "So, where shall we begin? Let's go get something to drink — I'm parched, and you should be, trudging home in that kind of a temper."

"I'm not sure I have enough change…" Hikari fumbled in her pocket for the remains of her school lunch money, glancing at it, and pulling a face as she held it out. "Nope. No go. Sorry, Ari. I did tell you I was broke."

"So I'll treat you." Arina's eyes twinkled with mischief. "It's no bother. Besides, I have a feeling that they're doing a special discount for students today — come on. Follow me."

Hikari stared at her friend, non-plussed, but she did not put up a fight, and soon they were squeezed into a corner booth in a packed coffee house, having been served with drinks and cake. Hikari frowned as she glanced at her drink, then she sighed.

"I can't pay you back, you know."

"You won't have to. Trust me." Arina dimpled. "You need to have a little faith in me."

"Well, if you say so." Hikari sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "So, what window shopping do you have in mind, anyway?"

"I need to find an outfit for Kamiko-san's party on Saturday." Arina said pensively. "We only have three days left, after all — and I want to look my best."

She eyed her companion thoughtfully.

“You are still going to that, right?” She asked doubtfully. “I mean, your Dad didn’t decide it was too expensive for you to get the bus to my house and ride with me there?”

“No, I’m going.” Hikari looked rueful. “I’m allowed to do that.”

“Good.” Arina rested her chin in her hands, regarding her friend thoughtfully. “Because I heard that Haru-kun is definitely going to be there. It’ll be your perfect chance to speak to him, without the bother of school and whatever else… don’t you think so?”

“Haru-kun…” Hikari’s cheeks flushed slightly, then she shook her head.

“Haru-kun doesn’t know I’m even alive… except for the fact my head blocks his view when we sit in maths class and he’s trying to read the board.” She said heavily. “It doesn’t matter if we meet at a party or if we don’t. He probably won’t even remember my name.”

“Now, that’s no kind of attitude.” Arina scolded, taking a sip of her drink. “That’s why you’re coming to mine first, isn’t it? I’m going to dress you up so that you’ll knock him dead. You’re not hideous, you know… a little make-up, the right outfit — he won’t be able to miss you.”

Hikari glanced at her friend, taking in her bright, pretty features and her well-proportioned figure, and snorted.

“Sure, because I’ll be standing with you.” She said ironically. “Forget it, already. We’ve already established that you’re the one guys like, and I’m the one that they ignore. That’s just how it is… you won’t change that with a bit of lip gloss and a touch of eyeliner.”

“We’ll see.” Arina said lightly. “Eat, will you? I don’t want to spend too much more time here… if I can help it.”

“What’s the big hurry?” Hikari obediently finished the remains of her cake, draining her drink. “You were the one who wanted to come in here.”

“Nothing really.” Arina turned, a frown touching her brow as she glanced across the shop. “Just… that woman, over there, by the door — she’s my father’s new PA and I know that if we stick around, she’ll want to come speak to me. She’s so annoying — I really don’t need to talk to her on any level. Are you done?”

“Yes, but…”

“Then let’s go.” Arina grabbed her by the hand, glancing around them and then pulling her friend towards the rear door of the establishment. “Quickly — no, don’t look back at her. We’re getting out of here and believe me, if she claps eyes on you, she’ll never let it go.”

“But Ari…” Hikari faltered, but her friend didn’t hesitate until they were well away from the coffee house. Then she leant up against the wall, letting out her breath in a rush. Hikari frowned, casting an apprehensive glance behind her.

“Ari, we didn’t… you didn’t pay.” She murmured.

Arina grinned, shrugging her shoulders.

“Then you really don’t owe me anything, do you?” She said airily, and Hikari pursed her lips.

“Are you sure it’s all right?” She asked doubtfully. Arina dismissed it with a flick of her hands.

“You know that if there’s any trouble, Father will just take care of it.” She said carelessly. “Don’t worry so much, Hi-chan. We have more important things to do — such as finding the perfect knock-out dress for this party. Right?”

“Well, you do.” Hikari pushed the thought aside, nodding. “I’ve got no money to spend, I told you.”

“You worry far too much.” Arina repeated. “Come on, will you?”

Hikari bit her lip, glancing once more in the direction of the coffee house. They had had this conversation before, she realised, and as usual, Arina had gotten her way. Somehow, voicing such things always left Hikari feeling a little stupid, since her flamboyant, charismatic friend always had an answer for everything.

“And she is right. Her father will probably pay any outstanding amounts — that’s probably what will happen. She likely told the staff to do that, since he’s such a bigshot in this area.” She reasoned uneasily. “Just like always… noone ever bothers about Arina when she does things like that. I shouldn’t fuss so much — she’s my friend, and I trust her to know what she’s doing.”

“Hey! Hi-chan, stop playing the space cadet and take a look!” Arina’s exclamation made her start and she glanced up, following her friend’s excited gesture towards the window display of a nearby fashion shop. Despite herself, her breath caught in her throat as she rested her gaze on the outfit in the window.

“Ari, are you kidding?” She whispered. “You’re going to go to Kamiko’s party dressed… like that?”

“Hell, no.” Arina giggled. “But it’s always fun to try stuff on. Come on, will you? I was thinking of how it’d look on you — you do want to catch Haru-kun’s attention, right?”

“Yes, but you know I can’t.” Hikari shook her head. “It costs more than my whole allowance will. There’s no chance.”

“It’s on sale. Half off.” Arina shrugged. “Surely you can get your folks to advance your money? I mean, listen to me — this is about the path of true love, right? This isn’t any ordinary party.”

“Ari, I’m not even sure I like it…”

“Then come and try it on, and we’ll see what it looks like, huh?” Arina was already hauling her towards the door of the shop. “Come on, already! It’s not like the shop’s on fire, and they don’t charge you money for trying things on — geez! Lighten up and be a teenager for a while, okay? You’ve been nothing but a drag this week, you know — it’s no fun coming shopping with you when you act like this!”

Hikari frowned, hearing the note of impatience in her friend’s tones, and slowly she nodded.

“Fine. I’ll try it on.” She agreed slowly, and Arina dimpled, her moment of annoyance gone as quickly as it had come. Vaguely Hikari was aware that she had been manipulated, but as Arina pulled her towards the clothing racks, she pushed the thought aside.

“After all, it is window shopping. And I can dream.” She murmured. “There’s no way Father will give me anything early — not before he’s paid — and besides, Haru-kun isn’t ever going to know I’m alive. But… but Arina’s right. There’s no harm in trying it on. In pretending. Just for a while…”

“Lord Kintsusei.”

Kintsusei set down his quill, casting a quizzical look at the man who stood in the doorway, bowing low before his pseudo-emperor as he waited for approval to progress into the man’s private quarters. Kintsusei flicked a finger, and the man bowed again, stepping obediently towards him and pausing not far from the wooden desk at which the would be King sat.

“My Lord, as you commanded.” He said quietly, holding out a scroll and resting it on the surface between them. “The Shijin-Tenchishou.”

“The scroll?” Kintsusei’s eyes lit up with hope as he grasped the rolled blue parchment between his fingers, his hands trembling as he loosened the ribbons that held it tightly in its rolled up form. “The prophesy — this is it?”

“Yes, my Lord.” The man tilted his head slightly once more. “The scroll belonging to Nakago, and the lady Yui, Seiryuu no Miko. It wasn’t easy to find it — but I have persevered.”

“You have done well.” Kintsusei unfastened the tight knot, stretching the scroll open on the table before him as he ran his gaze over the text. “Yui-sama did not summon Seiryuu within the borders of this land — instead, she called on the Beast God in the Western province — in Sairou. Because of that, I was afraid that this had been lost… but it seems that she used… a different method to summon the God, after all. That this story — this tale of holy treasures — is a true one.”

“Yes, my Lord.” The man agreed respectfully, and Kintsusei ran his finger along the edge of the worn, aging parchment.

“This was given to Yui-sama and Nakago by my father.” He said softly. “To help to assemble Seiryuu’s celestial guardians. And yet, this text describes instead the process for summoning Seiryuu — the manner in which the Lady Yui called him from the heavens. It seems that without Seiryuu no Miko, the only course of action to find Seiryuu is to find these treasures — these… Shinzahou. But what power could do that? Kutou’s resources are limited, and…”

He faltered, as out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a flash of steel, and instinctively he tensed, his hand going to his blade as he deftly dodged aside from the man’s sudden sword-thrust. Cursing, he drew his own weapon, leaping to his feet as he parried a second attempt.

“What is the meaning of this?” He demanded, and the man lifted his gaze, cold hate in the depths of his dark eyes.

“Your father’s blood stains all of Kutou, and yet you call yourself leader in his place.” He said softly, raising his blade to try again, and Kintsusei found he had to use all his wits to avoid the would-be assassin’s sharp sword technique. “Yet you too spill the blood of the people. I’m sorry, Lord Kintsusei. For the good of Kutou, all of the tainted line must be slain. This country continues to flounder whilst your cursed life continues. You seek to summon Seiryuu, just as he did. And this land… how many more will suffer before your family are satisfied?”

“I am not here to kill this land! I seek to repair it!” Kintsusei deflected the man’s blows with renewed determination at this, his eyes narrowing. “You should know as well as anyone here that I was never my father’s son, even in his lifetime. I have trusted you as my aide for the past ten years — and yet now, you turn on me?”

“Your aspirations become dangerous, Lord.” The man said, unmoved. “To summon the Beast and cause harm to his lands… besides…”

“Besides?”

Kintsusei ducked a fresh, brutal sweep of the other man’s blade, bringing his own up to push his foe away. “Besides what? Tell me, what makes a man turn on the man he swore in as Emperor?”

For a moment, there was no answer. Then, as the man gripped his weapon more tightly, the words came.

“The civil uprising near the capital… my family was there.” He murmured. “You, and your men… your inability to keep control even despite the fact I put so much faith in you — in the end, you slew my family in pursuit of your greater goals. You, your negligence, your inability to understand. And I will avenge them… all of them. I will.”

Kintsusei’s eyes widened with shock and for a moment he was taken off guard as the blade came down against his arm, scraping his cheek and embedding itself in his shoulder. At the shock of pain he let out a yell, adrenalin coursing through him as his heart pounded in his ears. As the wound burned, he lifted his own sword, flinging it back in his enemy’s direction. This time, he too met his mark, as the blade plunged through the man’s chest, causing blood to spurt out and spatter across the unrolled scroll on the desk. As his former ally fell, Kintsusei drew a shaky breath into his lungs, red liquid dripping from the end of his blade as he registered what he had done.

“Lord Kintsusei!”

At the sound of the commotion, guards spilled into the chamber, stopping dead at the sight that awaited them.

“Lord Kintsusei! What…?”

“Traitor.” Kintsusei managed, gesturing in the direction of the squirming, writhing body of his former advisor even as the man entered his final death throes. “Assassin.”

At this, the first soldier stepped forward, gazing down on the hapless man with a look that, for ice, would have rivaled Nakago’s

own. He glanced at his master, and slowly, Kintsusei nodded his head, a bitter bile on his tongue as the fight rushed out of him. The soldier pulled his sword from his scabbard, raising it, and then, with one, sweeping blow, he struck off the head of the dying man.

“A traitor no more, Lord Kintsusei.” He said quietly, turning to his companion with no emotion in his gaze. “You are wounded — shall I summon a physician?”

“No… no.” Kintsusei touched his bleeding arm, then shook his head. “It’s a flesh wound — nothing more.”

He sighed, inwardly shaking at the encounter as he gestured to the bleeding corpse that now littered his floor.

“Dispose of that in the usual manner.” He said softly. “I must go… to the shrine of Seiryuu. I need… I need to gather my thoughts.”

“Lord, allow my men to accompany you.” The soldier said softly, gesturing to two of his companions, and after a moment, Kintsusei nodded.

“Very well.” He agreed. “But they must wait outside. I must… speak to Seiryuu alone.”

He scooped up the stained scroll, glancing at it, then rolling it up.

“No doubt he didn’t intend me to keep this, which is why it’s all the more important that I have it in safety now.” He reflected, slipping it into the folds of his cloak as he did so. “Report to me when the deed is done, Hyoushin. And more, discover if he acted alone, or if more betrayal lurks within these walls. I will be awaiting your report.”

The soldier bowed his head, and Kintsusei gratefully withdrew from the chamber, his heart still beating fit to burst in his chest as he made the short walk across the palace complex to the delapidated Seiryuu shrine. The presence of the two guardsmen comforted him, for the attack had struck his sense of instability all the more, and despite his apparent composure, he had been left reeling.

“A fight that could have gone either way, an assault by a man I trusted.” He whispered. “This is how Kutou is… but I must… I must find a way to change that. So I… I must live. And… and I must find Yui-sama’s treasure. Her… her Shin..za… hou. Then… then perhaps I can find the power to summon the Beast God… somehow.”

As they reached the shrine, he paused, glancing at the guards.

“Wait here for further orders.” He said quietly. “I must enter alone.”

“Yes, my Lord.” The men bowed, and Kintsusei nodded, pushing his way into the temple and dropping down before the tarnished gilt statue, gazing up at the glittering azure eyes as he lay the scroll down on the floor at the beast’s feet. In his head, he played out the encounter once again, realising that he had truly come close to death.

“But I am a soldier. I can fight for my life, thanks to Nakago’s regime.” He muttered, even as he brought his hands together in prayer. “Seiryuu protect me, I *must* live. I must not be killed yet. There’s noone else to do this work — I must be the one to bring peace to Kutou. There is… there is no other option. Even if people die — even if his family were killed — it’s Kutou’s instability that is to blame. This is what I must stop — so no more men are driven mad by grief.”

He frowned, his mind flitting to the cold, impassive gaze of the soldier who had carried out the final beheading. Of all men, he knew, that this was probably the only one in whom he could have complete faith, for Kintsusei had saved his life when Hyoushin had been a young man of only seventeen. He had been an orphan, an enslaved son of a long dead tribe, just as Nakago had come to be. And yet, the bond Kintsusei shared with his chief bodyguard was built on a firm trust that the Prince had not yet had cause to doubt. Although in front of others, the formality of Emperor and bodyguard was always observed, Kintsusei considered Hyoushin more like a brother and a friend, even despite their vast differences.

“He swore his life to me, when I freed him from that existance. And he has never let me down.” He murmured. “If he is the only one I can trust, at least I have one man I can put my faith in to do my bidding without ulterior motive. His loyalty is beyond doubt — his pride too strong for him to betray me. I must… I must have him find out if there is other treason afoot here. I can’t be distracted by petty plots and machinations — I have bigger things to do.”

He sighed, gazing up at the dragon once again.

“To become truly Emperor, my duty is clear.” He added. “I must save Kutou — whatever it takes.”

“A heavy burden indeed, my Lord.”

The voice from the shadows made Kintsusei start, and he swung around, his hand twitching towards his sword as he searched for the source of the voice. There was a soft laugh and then a man stepped from the darkness, holding up his hands in mock surrender as he bowed his head in his leader’s direction.

“Have no fear, my Lord. It is simply a priest come to pay homage to the God.” He said softly, and Kintsusei frowned, his demeanour relaxing as he realised his companion was unarmed.

“Kikei.” He murmured. “Why didn’t you alert me to your presence when I first entered?”

“I was lost in my reflections, Lord.” The man known as Kikei said smoothly. “You have the taint of blood about you, Kintsusei-sama. Has there been… some trouble?”

“Treachery is rife within this walls just as it is without them.” Kintsusei glanced down at his bleeding arm, shrugging his shoulders helplessly. “No matter how long I pretend to be Emperor, or how hard I try to bring peace, the bottom line is still the same. Kutou is awash with tribes and cultures and settlements who have rivalries with one another and grievances with the royal house. My late father did much damage to the hearts and souls of these people — there is a bitterness in this land which all my years in this position have failed to quell. I don’t know, Kikei — maybe I am not as strong as I thought I was, when I first agreed to ascend to my father’s position. I was raised a soldier, after all. Not a Prince.”

“Such doubts, my Lord, from one who has ruled Kutou in deed for almost twenty years.” Kikei looked disapproving, clucking his tongue as slowly he approached the man, dropping before him in a gesture of reverence. “You know there are always dark men in shadow, waiting to take power for themselves — surely by this time, you are willing to understand this?”

“Yes, I suppose, but…”

Kintsusei frowned, sitting back on his heels as he gazed up once more at the image of the Beast God.

“Kikei, you’re a priest — a holy man. You have spiritual power beyond anyone I have ever met, save Nakago himself.” He said softly. “You have been there by my side as long as I have been Emperor, or perhaps even longer than that. You know I respect your counsel… I am lost and I do not know how to act.”

“I was under the impression that you sought Yui-sama’s Shinzahou, my Lord.” Kikei said evenly. Kintsusei hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders.

“If it even still exists.” He said sadly. “It should be here, in the Shrine of Seiryuu, but it is not. I don’t know where to begin searching for something that legend dictates carries so much power. Yet, if there

is no other way to raise Seiryuu and bless Kutou, surely I must…"

"You will not be able to raise Seiryuu, my Lord." Kikei got to his feet, placing his hand on Kintsusei's shoulder as if counselling a small child. "Not with Yui-sama's Shinzahou alone."

"But…?" Kintsusei stared, and Kikei smiled, in that instance giving the impression of a snake as he eyed his master beadily.

"The power of Seiryuu can only be raised by the Miko, when she summons him." He said softly. "The pure blood, the untouched body of that Miko combined with the power of Kutou's seven stars… or with the power of a Shinzahou, in which the Beast God's power is sealed — these are ways to summon Seiryuu from his sleep. But my Lord, you are no Miko. And if I may be so bold, your flesh… is not untouched."

Kintsusei frowned, glancing at his hands, too preoccupied with the problem to infer the insult in his sly companion's words.

"I know that." He agreed at length. "But… even so…"

"You wish to protect this land, Lord?" Kikei asked softly. Kintsusei raised his head, nodding.

"More than anything." He agreed. "Nakago… Nakago began to put the pieces together, to bring all four corners of this world under one secure ruling star… and he would have succeeded, if not for the Suzaku warriors of the Southern Lands. They didn't understand and now… even Nakago cannot rise from the dead. Though I dearly wish he could — he wouldn't have the doubts that I do."

"That is because, like me, he was a Hin." Kikei said frankly. "And there are no people in the entirety of existance so tenacious or dedicated when it comes to a cause they believe in — save, of course, my Lord's own family line."

"There is no honour or dedication in my line, Kikei, so you needn't worry about offending me." Kintsusei got to his feet, resting his hand against the silent gold statue as he contemplated. "Your people have been reviled for a long time, even before the massacre. So many were killed, yet of all of those people, one man who would have saved Kutou and everyone in this world survived and came to greatness. One man who understood suffering, brought an end to it by slaying my father and his associates — or at least, he would have done, had he not been slain himself. Maybe I am fated to follow his path after all. Others may hate the Hin, Kikei, but not me. I have nothing but grief for my father's deeds, and nothing but respect for your people."

“And it is for this reason I pledged my loyalty to you, Kintsusei-sama.” Kikei said gravely. “And in you and you alone that I have trusted the true nature of my heritage. Your father would never have allowed me to serve him, had he known what I was, and I was unable to save my kind from expulsion and extinction. But when you were born, the stars were bright… your very name holds the character for ‘life’. I knew then that Kutou was destined to be saved, not in that lifetime but in this — when you were ready to accept the burden.”

“Do you truly think that?” Kintsusei hesitated, and Kikei nodded, his beady eyes almost closed as he regarded his master from beneath heavy lids.

“I speak only the truth, for I am a man of faith.” He said softly. “In you is Kutou’s salvation… that is why, of all those who shared a link with your father, you alone were spared retribution.”

“Then tell me, Kikei, what must I do to bring about this salvation?” Kintsusei asked softly. “If I cannot raise Seiryuu — how can I possibly hope to protect this land at all? There is no Seiryuu no Miko. That legend was ended when Yui-sama returned to her own world and she has never returned, not since there are no longer any Seiryuu Seishi here to guide and protect her. I feel like I’m chasing ghosts.”

“And perhaps you are.” Kikei rubbed his chin pensively. “Perhaps you are. But there is more than one way to skin a cat, so the old saying goes.”

“Skin a…?” Kintsusei looked blank, and Kikei laughed, shaking his head.

“My Lord, even for your thirty three years, sometimes I am touched by the nature of your innocence.” He said softly, and Kintsusei frowned, shaking his head.

“I wouldn’t call any part of myself innocent, living in this world as I have for the past eighteen years.” He murmured. “I have tried and tried so many times to bring order and peace to Kutou, and yet the wounds still run so deep within the people. I am beginning to despair… Kikei, if you know a way, please, tell me. Every day I seem to be at risk from someone I considered an ally, and I do not know how much longer I can survive in such an atmosphere. Truly, I don’t even know if I can live one day to the next, and if I die… if I die…”

“Kutou’s hopes will be destroyed.” Kikei said quietly. Kintsusei nodded.

“There is noone else.” He whispered. “Because of war, I have taken

no wife, sired no son. I am the last of my line and I hold a fragile grip over everything — my death would ignite further bloodshed between those who support me and those who do not — till this land ceases to exist at all. I am of Kutou, Kikei. I am of this land, and I seek to see it healed. If you know how — whatever the method — please. Tell me. Share with me the wisdom you so often have before — I am not afraid of risk, if it will prove Kutou's salvation."

Kikei was silent for a moment, then he cast his companion a sidelong glance.

"You speak with such conviction. You might almost be Hin yourself." He reflected, and Kintsusei looked rueful.

"I take that as a compliment, from you." He acknowledged. "So you will help me?"

"I am sworn to do so, Lord. You are, after all, Emperor of Kutou."

"Whatever that means." Kintsusei nodded. "Then tell me. What are you thinking, wise Kikei?"

Kikei gazed up at the statue of Seiryuu.

"I do not know the whereabouts of the Shinzahou — not for Seiryuu or any other God." He said softly. "But I do know that, for many generations, the Hin had faith in a deity who acted in both conjunction with and in conflict with this world. You were one of Nakago's men, so perhaps you already know this — that as a people, we worshipped a being known as Tenkou, the manifestation of the 'Yin' factor in this world of balance we call home."

"I have heard something of it, yes." Kintsusei frowned. "But I am a man of Seiryuu, Kikei. In this you cannot consider me Hin."

"Ah, I know." Kikei's black eyes glittered with amusement and he nodded his head. "I would not ask my Emperor to become a heretic to save his own lands — that would be improper of me. Besides, I too am a man of Seiryuu. You should know this, as it is my responsibility to guard and care for the shrine."

"True." Kintsusei acknowledged. "So what of this Tenkou, then?"

"Tenkou was destroyed by Suzaku's power." Kikei raised his gaze to the ceiling. "The men of the South, who also spoke for your admired Shougun, Nakago. Yet, though he is gone, not all of his power is destroyed. As a being, he proved weak in the end — a failure, and unworthy of the worship given him for so many centuries. But to gain so much power, he drew on other strengths — parts of this world

which gave him the ability to transcend the ordinary and become something close to a true God. These elements still exist, even though Tenkou does not. They are untouched, sealed away… but they might yet prove to be of use to you — if you should be of resolute mind."

"Elements?" Kintsusei looked blank, and Kikei nodded.

"Shards of spiritual power sealed within four ancient places, deep within the heartlands of each country." He agreed. "Within places holy to each Beast God, from whom Tenkou stole his strength."

"From each Beast God?" Kintsusei stared, and Kikei smiled.

"You see, there is little true heresy, after all." He reflected. "All is borne of the same source, in the end. Yes, Lord. For Suzaku, Seiryuu, Genbu and Byakko exists a power, a spiritual entity who holds an element of the God's power within the land itself. In ancient legend, before the advent of Tenkou, scribes wrote about them as the four Mages — if you were able to harness their power into one being, you may be able to wield the strength you need."

"Mages?" Kintsusei looked doubtful. "Are you sure?"

"I will show you the scribings myself, Lord." Kikei nodded his head. "And then you will understand what I am trying to say."

"And to raise these… mages?"

"Ah. I will help you, as ever I do." Kikei said lightly. "But they are, as I said, shards of magic. They, by themselves, are not strong enough to save Kutou and bring peace across all four Kingdoms under the crown of one man. Yet it is a step in the right direction. And if you were to find the Shinzahou… bring all four of them together into the one place — the power of all the Beast Gods could be yours, not only the power of Seiryuu. Then you would, truly, be leader of the four Kingdoms, would you not? Your vision for peace would be clear, if you were to carry the blessing of Suzaku, Seiryuu, Genbu and Byakko all before the people."

Kintsusei was silent for a moment. Then, slowly, he nodded.

"I will hear more of your plan, Kikei." He said softly. "Tell me what it is you believe I must do."

Chapter 3

Chapter Two

"I still think that you should try your Dad on the subject of an advance."

As the two girls sat in Arina's expansive bedroom, Hikari settled herself against the wall with a sigh, shaking her head as her friend eyed her expectantly.

"You don't know my Dad very well, if you think he'd buy it." She said with a shrug. "It just won't work. I told you. He believes in teaching us the value of money."

"Your folks aren't as uptight as all that." Arina objected, stretching out on her stomach and flipping open the catch on her cabinet as she pulled open the drawer, rummaging around inside. "You never know. Try it on your mother. She's a softie, and you know she'll want you to look your best, if the guy you like is going to be there. Why don't you ask her? It couldn't hurt, and I bet she has ways to persuade your father that you don't."

She grinned, her eyes twinkling mischievously for a moment.

"You did say, after all, that they're still disgustingly lovey-dovey even after being married all this time?"

"Yeah, that's true." Hikari pulled a face. "I don't know… I guess it all seems so easy for them. I mean, Mother met Father, and that was it, pretty much. Far as I can tell, she fell for him, he fell for her, she married him as soon as she could and they've been together ever since. I doubt either of them remember what it's like to be in middle school with a guy you like sitting so close but so far away… I can't imagine either of them ever had any trials or tribulations to overcome. Even Uncle Keisuke talks about them like they were some kind of soulmates or something — really, it's kinda sickening, to be honest."

Arina laughed, but there was something in her eyes that, for an instant almost looked like regret, and Hikari frowned, eying her curiously.

"Something bothering you, Ari?"

"No, not me." Arina shook her head. "Why?"

“Nothing. Guess it’s just me.” Hikari shrugged. “So are your parents gonna be back at all tonight? Or do you get to have the house all to yourself yet again, huh?”

“Don’t know yet.” Arina admitted. “I don’t think Father will be here. Mother might, but it won’t be like I really have it to myself. You know that Dad’s housekeeper will want to come poke her head around the door to make sure noone’s abducted me or anything.”

She snorted.

“Like I need a babysitter, but whatever.”

“I wish I had the house to myself sometimes.” Hikari grinned ruefully. “If Makoto’s not there annoying me, one of my parents generally is. It must be nice to just have space… you’re really lucky, Ari. Your parents buy you whatever you need and they don’t crowd you. I wish my home was like that, but in an apartment the size of ours its impossible not to fall over everyone.”

She pulled a face.

“With Dad’s obsession with money management and Mum’s belief that its more important to have people than things around you, it can get kinda stifling.” She added. “It’s nice to come away like this and just chill out.”

“Well, you can always sleep over here tonight. Call your folks and ask them if they mind.” Arina shrugged. “You don’t have to tell them my people are away… it would be fun, and we could order food and plan our outfits for the party. Just on the offchance you don’t get up the nerve to speak to you mother about the money for that dress.”

“I can’t.” Hikari grimaced. “It’s my aunt’s birthday and I have to be home by seven, because we’re all going out to some restaurant or other. Uncle Keisuke is paying the tab, else no doubt we’d probably be eating takeout on a park bench somewhere — but I promised I’d go and I can’t get out of it, really. Besides, Aunt Mayo isn’t so bad, not really. At least she and Uncle Keisuke have the decency not to be goopy in public.”

“Bummer.” Arina shrugged her shoulders. “But if it’s that way, it’s that way. No matter. There’s always another night.”

She delved back into the drawer again, finally finding what she was looking for and tossing it onto the carpet. “Here. Help yourself, by the way… I’ll run down and get something to drink.”

“Ari, I…” Hikari began, but her friend was already half way out of

the door, and Hikari frowned, glancing down at the small white box of cigarettes that lay on the carpet, the bright blue lighter alongside it. She bit her lip, reaching out a hesitant hand to touch it, then pausing.

"I know exactly what Mother would say, if she saw me." She reflected, shaking her head. "She'd be furious — she's always hated it. And Dad doesn't do it… but…"

She sighed, scooping the box up and turning it over, glancing at it absently as she remembered the first time she had tried smoking. As ever, it had been one of Arina's bright ideas, but she had done her best to keep her experimentations a secret from her parents, knowing that even though Arina's indulgent, busy family might not mind, her own most certainly would. It had been something of a spasmodic habit with her, for that reason, and one which she had tried to stop, but somehow, when she was in Arina's company, saying no was more difficult than if she was out on her own.

"They'd at least say I was too young." She reflected, slipping a cigarette from the packet and lighting it carefully, dropping the box back down onto the carpet as she inhaled the thick smoke. "But then again, they don't have to know. And it is up to me — it's not like it's something illegal, after all. Arina's Dad does it — I've seen him — and Mother and Father never say anything about that. And it isn't like I do it at home… so it's not like I'm doing anything to hurt them. Dad would probably only say it was a waste of my money, anyway — but it's not up to him what I spend my money on, in the end. I am fifteen… I can make decisions for myself."

"Tea!" Arina returned at that moment, bearing steaming mugs and she grinned at her friend, setting them down on the unit as she lit up her own cigarette.

"You didn't need any persuading." She reflected. "Have you given up trying to give up? Or has it really just been that kind of a day?"

"I guess it has." Hikari sighed. "I wish I could stop here the night, Ari. The last thing I want to do is sit opposite my brother and watch him chew his food with his mouth open."

"Your brother is an alien. That goes without saying." Arina said dismissively. "Besides, it's an hour and a half till seven and the bus leaves every ten minutes. We've ages yet — lets leave your impending doom alone a while and talk hair and make-up."

"Mine or yours?" Hikari raised an eyebrow, flicking ash from her cigarette as she eyed her friend quizzically. "Are you seriously trying to set me up with Haru-kun, Ari? I know you and your bright ideas —

I find it hard to resist them, too. But I'm not going to go to this party looking like a freak, all right? So keep that in mind… it's not going to happen!"

"Would I do that to you? I'm offended." Arina pulled a face, reaching out her free hand to loosen Hikari's long braid. "And of course I meant yours. I keep telling you, you're not hideously deformed. You take after your mother — you have her eyes and her cheekbones, and it gives you a really sweet kind of look. If you made an effort, I'm sure you could get him to notice you. You just have to take a few more chances, that's all. Otherwise he's just going to think you're another ordinary schoolgirl. And there are enough of them around him already."

"I am another ordinary schoolgirl." Hikari said darkly. "That's part of the problem."

She took another drag on her cigarette, glancing at her watch and muttering a curse.

"It's stopped. I knew it was running slowly — no wonder I was late for school this morning."

"You are determined to be a grouch this evening." Arina scolded. "What's really eating you, Hi-chan? Is it that time of the month or what? Because it's starting to get annoying, you know — are you that worried about your test scores? Or is it Haru-kun that's bothering you? Because whatever it is, spit it out. If you can't tell me, who can you tell?"

"I'm fine." Hikari shook her head. "Just fed up and bored, I suppose. But at least there's the party to think about, right? And if you really think I have a chance of getting Haru-kun's attention…"

She got to her feet, glancing at her reflection in her friend's full-length mirror as she did so. A young, fairly ordinary looking schoolgirl looked back, with thick, dark hair waving loosely over her shoulders and framing a face which, as Arina had said, could be termed 'sweet' but decidedly not 'femme fatale'. Her mother's expressive hazel eyes gazed out on the world, but it was her father's strong chin that gave her face it's defining character, and although at first glance people generally likened her to her mother, on closer inspection they were forced to admit that both of her parents were reflected in her face. She was neither tall not short, fat nor overly skinny, with an average figure that, beside Arina's well formed one, seemed decidedly on the insignificant side. In her school uniform, she looked little more than what she was — fifteen years old and fed up, and she managed a

rueful grin, shaking her head.

"I don't see how he'd ever notice me." She admitted. "*I* wouldn't notice me, if I was him."

"That's why we're going to make you over, silly." Arina said mischievously. "And why you are going to speak to your parents about your allowance. You understand? You are wearing that dress to the party, Hi-chan — its an absolute definite, one way or the other. So be a good girl and summon up your nerve — otherwise I'll be taking matters into my own hands!"

"You know my Dad would kill me if I let you buy me anything like that." Hikari wheeled around, horror in her gaze as she met her friend's teasing stare. Arina shrugged.

"Who said anything about that?" She said innocently. "Just talk to them, okay? Tell them how important it is. Your parents are softies, they'll get the picture. And if they don't, well, we'll look at plan B."

She winked.

"Trust me. Everything is going to be just fine."

"Another busy morning."

The tall, scar-faced bandit heaved his burden down onto the floor, casting his companion a triumphant grin as he dusted his hands free of dirt and grime. "The sun always brings out the best takings… the villagers will be happy tonight."

The red-haired man got up from his perch against the window, running his beady, wolfish gaze over the spoils and then grinning, revealing fang-edged teeth as he nodded his head.

"No kidding." He reflected. "I almost wish I'd come with you, Kouji — if I'd known it was going to be so successful, I would'a."

"So why didn't you?" The man named Kouji dropped down onto an empty seat, casting his friend a quizzical gaze. "It ain't like you, Genrou, to skip out on collecting toll. You usually like taggin' along — you always have, even since you became Kashira. What's with this pensive attitude of yours lately? I don't get it."

"Me neither." The wolf frowned, glancing at his hands, then shrugging his shoulders. "And I would've… only…"

He hesitated, and Kouji's brows drew together into a frown.

“Only what?” He demanded. “Come on, spit it out. You can tell ol’ Kouji-aniki anything. Is this about Anzu? Did you manage to upset her or something? Because if you did…”

“Anzu?” Genrou stared, then he snorted, shaking his head.

“This ain’t a woman thing.”

“Then what?” Kouji frowned. “Spill, Genrou. Somethin’ that’s goin’ to affect the mountain — somethin’ like the last time?”

Genrou pursed his lips, and for a moment he didn’t answer. Then, slowly, he slid back the sleeve of his jacket, unwinding the thick white wrapping that covered his right forearm from view. Amid the faded scars of battle, the red character for ‘wings’ burned brightly, and Kouji swore, his eyes opening wide with dismay.

“Suzaku?” He whispered. “Shit, Genrou, you’ve not had that for… for years. I thought all of that… I thought it was over.”

“It has appeared, sometimes. When I’ve been fightin’.” Genrou ran his finger over the character, shooting his friend a troubled look. “But I… I ain’t fightin’, Kouji. I’m jus’ sittin’ here, an’ there it is.”

Kouji’s eyes narrowed.

“You covered it, so noone’d see it.” He realised. “An’ start worryin’ that somethin’ was goin’ to happen. We almost lost Reikaku-zan, the last time. We lost a lot of people, too, leadin’ up to your last fight for Kounan. An’ though it wasn’t your fault, an’ you an’ the others fixed it, there’s still a lot of people… I don’t know. If Suzaku called you again… Genrou, would you go?”

Genrou did not answer, and Kouji sighed.

“The last time, you left Anzu an’ everythin’ behind, and ran off fightin’ demons.” He murmured. “But… this time…”

“I haven’t decided anythin. I ain’t spoken to Chichiri, or asked him whether or not the same thing’s happened to him.” Genrou cut across him. “I’m Genrou of Reikaku-zan, Kouji, an’ that’s what I’ve been since Miaka went back to her world. Sure, there have been occasions — times when I’ve been Tasuki. But as you said, not for years. It’s been six years since Taka went back to the other world — an’ in that time… nothing.”

“But it was ten years the last time.” Kouji reminded him. “And your friends had barely been reborn. What if you have to go track them down again? Weren’t their memories sealed?”

“I don’t know, all right?” Genrou exclaimed, and Kouji shook his head impatiently, reaching across to cuff his companion.

“Stop yellin’. I’m on your side.” He reproached. “You know that. But listen, Genrou. Last time you went… last time…”

“I know.” Genrou sighed, leaning up against the wall as he folded his arms across his chest. “But last time, things were… everythin’ wasn’t good. There was no food. The bandits were fallin’ apart. I had to do something. Anzu an’…well, I had no choice. We’d all have died, if I hadn’t. But that’s the thing. Right now… there’s nothing wrong. Crops are good. Takings are good. Noone’s sick or dyin’. The mountain is strong again, as if nothing ever happened to hurt it. So I don’t understand. What am I fightin’ to protect this time, if there’s nothing that needs protecting?”

“I guess you’ll haveta speak to Chichiri, then.” Kouji looked resigned. “Listen, Genrou, I’ve always been here as your backup and I always will be, you know… it’s not an issue with me. Just, it ain’t just me an’ the guys who worry when you’re away. An’ as the cub gets older…”

“I know.” Genrou held up his hands. “I get it. But even so…”

He glanced at the symbol on his arm once more, then sighed, winding the bandage around it once more.

“I ain’t even told Anzu yet.” He admitted. “But if it is something, I’ll have to. An’ just hope… that whatever it is… it ain’t a big deal. Taiitsukun did say I’d always be Tasuki, no matter what happened… I guess… I’ll just hope… it’s that. But I have a feelin’…a strange feelin’…that it isn’t.”

“Hikari!”

As Hikari stepped off the bus, she saw her mother standing in the doorway of the apartment building, an anxious look on her face. “Hikari-chan, you’re cutting it fine — did you forget about tonight?”

“No… I didn’t, I’m sorry.” Hikari frowned, meeting her mother’s gaze with an apologetic one of her own. “I was at Arina’s, working on something… a project. And… I lost track of time. My watch has stopped.”

She held up her arm as proof, and Miaka sighed, shaking her head.

“You have the same luck I always did with things like that.” She said resignedly. “Come on, quickly, inside and change. As it is, your

Uncle's running a little bit late so he and your Aunt called to ask if they could put it back a half hour or so — so you've time."

"Okay." Hikari nodded her head, allowing her companion to usher her into the building and into the lift that served the apartments on the left hand side of the building.

"Today was the day you got your test results, wasn't it?" Miaka eyed her daughter quizzically, and Hikari pulled a face.

"Yes." She admitted unwillingly. "But… I guess… I didn't do as well as… I could have."

Miaka frowned, spreading her hands.

"You're your mother's daughter." She said ruefully. "Still, you gave it your best, huh? You can't do more than that… it's not your fault if you're not a natural study-bug."

"Like Makoto is." Hikari frowned, and Miaka laughed.

"Yes, he is." She admitted. "But that's all right. There are other talents besides doing well in school. Just do the best you can, and your father and I, we'll be proud. That's all we ask, Hikari-chan."

Hikari sent her companion a sidelong glance, half wishing that her carefree, sweet-tempered mother would get annoyed at her lack of progress, but there was no indication of it on Miaka's face, and at length the girl sighed, nodding her head.

"I guess." She agreed.

"The last thing we want you to do is drive yourself crazy worrying about school exams." Miaka continued. "I know that when it was my turn, I did… way, way too much. But in the end, I just had to believe in myself. You'll be all right when it comes to the real thing, Hikari — I have a lot of faith in you."

"I wish my teachers felt the same way." Hikari sighed. "Mother?"

"Mm?"

"You know… Kamiko's party on Saturday night?"

"Yes… what about it?"

"You said it was all right — didn't you — for me to go? And then go back and… and sleep the night at… at Arina's?"

"Yes." Miaka agreed. "I thought you were going to go together — has that changed?"

“No…” Hikari bit her lip, then, “Mother… when you first met Dad, what… how did you… let him know you liked him?”

“When I first…?” Miaka looked startled, then she smiled, ruffling her fingers affectionately through Hikari’s long, tousled locks. “That’s a strange question to ask, when we were talking about a party.”

“I know.” Hikari pinkened. “Its just… there’s someone else going to the party, and Arina thinks… she thinks it…”

She faltered, and Miaka’s eyes softened. She grinned.

“Someone you like, huh?” She asked gently, and Hikari nodded.

“Yes… yes.”

“Ah.” Miaka’s expression became pensive. “Well, when I first told your father I loved him, he didn’t exactly react the same way as I’d hoped. In fact, he told me he didn’t feel the same at all… and it was only after we didn’t see each other for a little while that he realised that he did. So all I can say is, if you feel that way, you should try and tell him. After all, if you don’t, there’s no way he can know, is there?”

“Dad really said that to you?” Hikari looked doubtful. “That he didn’t like you at all?”

“Yes.” Miaka grinned. “But he was just scared, because he’d never had a girl tell him so plainly before. I guess I was a bit tactless about it, you know — just blurted it out in the middle of a rainstorm…”

Her eyes became misty, as if she was remembering something, and Hikari sighed.

“Arina thinks I should try and make a move, too.” She admitted. “But… but… Mother… do you think… would Father… would you… let me have an advance on my allowance?”

“An advance?” Miaka started out of her reverie, staring at her daughter as they reached the right floor. As the lift doors swung back, she frowned, slipping her arm through the teenager’s as they made their way along the hallway to the apartment that Hikari had always called home. “I don’t understand — why?”

“There… there’s this dress.” Hikari’s cheeks reddened once more. “And Arina says… she thinks… at the party… Haru would…”

She faltered, as Miaka eyed her in surprise.

“A dress?”

Hikari nodded.

"Yes."

"And you think that… if you wear this dress… this guy you like will notice you?"

"Y… yes."

"Oh, Hikari." Miaka hugged her daughter tightly. "You know, it doesn't matter what you wear, or what you look like. Really. It doesn't. It's about what's inside that counts. Beneath the skin."

"I know, you always say that, but… Mother, it's not easy being a teenager." Hikari responded. "When everyone… everything is about how you look and stuff. And if he doesn't notice me, how can he get to know who I am inside, huh? You have to be beautiful on the outside to be even worth noticing on the inside, you know… at least you do when you're fifteen. And I'm not as pretty as Arina is — I need all the help I can get. Please, Mother — will you talk to Father for me? Please? He might understand, if you tell him — he might… and I'm not asking for extra money, just… just to have it early. That's all. It wouldn't cost you any more, and…"

"Hikari." Miaka shook her head, slipping her key into the lock as she pushed back the apartment door. "Your father doesn't get paid for another two weeks — it's not so simple as that."

"But…" Hikari frowned, and Miaka sighed.

"If you want to ask him, ask him." She said gently. "I won't be the one to stand in the way of true love. But really, Hikari-chan, you don't need to go to such lengths. You're quite as pretty as Arina is, you know, and I'm sure that this boy, if he's a good person, would notice you regardless of what you were wearing."

"You really don't remember much about middle school, do you?" Hikari asked bitterly, and Miaka stared at her.

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing." Hikari shook her head, pulling her arm free from her mother's grip. "I'll go get changed. And I'll ask Dad, like you said."

"Hikari…?" Miaka called her back, but Hikari pretended she hadn't heard, shutting herself in her bedroom as she eyed herself once more in the mirror. She frowned.

"I guess adults really don't understand, once they're past the teenage thing." She reflected, loosening her school uniform as she rummaged through her belongings for something presentable to wear to dinner. "And they always say schooldays are the best of your life,

which is probably why they conveniently forget how difficult they are. Looks are everything, and Mother must be kidding if she thinks I'm even vaguely a match for Arina. All the guys like her — hell, Haru-kun probably does, too, knowing my luck. I have to at least do something!"

She ran a brush through her hair, fastening it back into its usual long braid and tossing it over her shoulder as she heard a knock on her bedroom door.

"Hikari?" Her father's voice came through the wooden partition and Hikari sighed, knowing that her parents had probably had one of their conferences in the time she had been secluded in her room.

"It would be nice if they sometimes didn't tell each other everything, if it means they're going to gang up on me." She muttered, sitting down on her bed. "Okay, Dad, it's open. I'm decent. You can come in."

"Right." The door slid back to reveal her father, and at the expression on his face, Hikari sighed, flopping back on the bed.

"You might as well save your breath, since I know what you're going to say." She said flatly. Taka sighed, hesitating, then coming to sit beside her.

"Listen, Hikari, money is tight." He said softly. "You know that… until I'm paid, we can't afford even a spare couple of thousand yen here or there. Everything has to be budgeted — you know that. We've had this conversation before."

"I know." Hikari grimaced, staring up at the ceiling. "But the party is Saturday. I can't help that."

"I'm sorry, it's just not possible." Taka shook his head. "Your mother explained to me why… why it was important to you, but you have a lot of very pretty outfits, you know. And I'm not sure I'd be happy if you spent your entire allowance on one thing, just to get a guy to notice you."

"It's not just about that." Hikari sighed. "It's… Dad, I'm fed up of not being able to buy anything my friends do, that's all. Everyone else at school always has the latest stuff, and I feel like I'm left behind. Especially when I'm at Arina's. She doesn't show it off, but…"

"Arina's father is a very successful businessman." Taka said evenly. "But everything comes at some price, you know. Her family — they're often away from home. You and Makoto at least have the benefit of having your mother and I on close call — and that's how it should be.

I've always believed that — that a family should stick together and be closeknit."

"Closeknit huh?" Hikari turned to stare at him at this. "What do you mean? Your parents got divorced — and you and your brother haven't spoken in what, since before I was born?"

Taka faltered, and a stricken look crossed his face. For the briefest of instants, Hikari had the impression that she'd caught her father in a lie. Then, he recovered himself, and the moment was gone.

"Even more reason for me to feel that way." He said softly. "It's not important, what my family did. This is about *this* family. I'd like us to have more money — I won't pretend otherwise. Money's always been a concern of mine, for as long as I can remember. But on balance, I'd rather have you and your mother and brother. You can't be replaced by any cash balance… or any brand new toy."

"Well, it just sucks." Hikari folded her arms. "I never get noticed because I can't keep up with anyone else my age. It's not fair… if these are meant to be the best years, why the hell do they suck so much!"

"Hikari…" Taka looked troubled. Then he sighed, getting up and pulling her to her feet.

"We have to go." He murmured. "Your Uncle and Aunt will be waiting for us, and let's not spoil the birthday celebrations with an argument, huh?"

"Noone asked me if I wanted to go to a stupid birthday party." Hikari said sullenly.

"And if you have that attitude, you won't go to your friend's, either." Taka said evenly. "Do you understand?"

Hikari stared at him in dismay, and Taka spread his hands.

"This subject is closed." he said softly. "We have somewhere we need to be."

"Fine." Hikari sighed, pulling away from him and flouncing towards the door of the room. "I'll be good. But dammit, Dad, it's really truly not fair. You and Mum might be happy with choosing this life, but you coulda thought about it before you landed Makoto and I in it!"

"Are you yelling again?"

Her brother's voice came from the end of the hallway, and she

pulled a grotesque face in his direction, turning her back on him as she headed to find her boots.

“God knows what I’m going to do now.” She muttered. “Arina sounded pretty serious… but there’s just no way. No way at all. No matter if I go to this party or not — Haru-kun is never going to notice me and it’s *just not fair*!”

Chapter 4

Chapter Three

So, another plot on Kintsusei's life had been foiled.

As Hyoushin instructed his men to dispose of the traitor's body, he stood back against the wall of the chamber, considering everything carefully. Bitterly he berated himself for having been away from his post for even the briefest of seconds.

But the Lord's sword-arm has always been second to none except that of Nakago's himself. "He reflected." Still, it was remiss. I will not be so again."

"Hyoushin-sama." A guard approached him at that moment, clutching the bloody mess that was the former advisor's head, and Hyoushin cast a brief glance at it, then met the man's gaze, flicking his eyebrow in a faint question.

"Yes?" He asked softly. "What is it?"

"Will we be… displaying… this?" The guard thrust the head forward, still dripping blood onto the floor, but Hyoushin did not even so much as flinch. Instead his lips twitched into a faint smile, and he nodded.

"In the usual way, that's what Lord Kintsusei said." He said evenly, as if they were discussing the weather. "The fate of a traitor's head is to be impaled on the South Gate. See to it."

"Yes, Hyoushin-sama." The man bowed his head. "And the body?"

"Burn it. He has no need of it now, and it is just taking up space." Hyoushin dismissed this with a flick of his hand. "Traitors do not deserve the time or land for burials. See that it is done directly… we will not trouble Lord Kintsusei with trivial things when his instructions have been perfectly clear."

He raised his head, gesturing to a young man who stood by the door, his eyes wide at the carnage before him and a sickly expression on his face.

"Aoiketsu."

"Yes, Hyoushin-sama?" Immediately the young man snapped to

attention, gazing up at his commander expectantly.

“Go, speak to the palace ladies. Tell them there is need of their expertise to clean this place at once.” Hyoushin said frankly. “Tell them not to waste time dallying over other tasks. I will not see Lord Kintsusei return to a blood-stained chamber.”

“At once, Hyoushin-sama.” The man named Aoiketsu seemed relieved to be away from the grotesque scene, turning on his heel and hurrying away into the hallways of the palace. Hyoushin’s expression twitched faintly into a look of annoyance at the boy’s eagerness to be away from the sight of battle, but he said nothing, merely turning to ensure that his other orders were being carried out. Seeing that they were, he nodded his head, pulling his cape more firmly around his body as he sheathed his own blooded sword.

“I must see to the Lord’s other comission.” He said softly. “Continue and finish here. Do not leave this place except on my errands, until the job is completed.”

With that he swept out of the room, knowing that his men would obey him to the letter, because they always did.

Hyoushin knew that he owed his life and his current existance entirely to Kintsusei, and it was that fact which had kept the two such different men in such close proximity for such a long time. In contrast to Kintsusei’s dark, Eastern features and distinctive mode of dress, Hyoushin was considered something of a ghost among his men, for he had the uncanny ability to slip in and out of places without being noticed. He possessed no magical powers of his own, yet sometimes, in the safety of their barracks, the men would discuss in hushed whispers the possibility that their commander was really a war spirit, and not a man at all.

There was some justification for their belief, for Hyoushin was fairskinned, with long silver hair bound back from his face in a warrior’s queue, and cool, violet eyes that rarely, if ever flecked with the faintest of emotion. His people had not been from Kutou originally, but had migrated there in a time before war and cruelty, and like the Hin, had been subsequently ostracised, slaughtered and enslaved as ‘outsiders’, and that had been his fate too until the day that he had met Kutou’s future Emperor, and had been freed from his slave shackles.

With all the fierce pride of his tribe, Hyoushin had repaid Kintsusei’s kindness to him by devoting his own existance to the man’s wishes, instead of his own. And yet, despite the cool, clinical nature of

his actions, and his complete inurement to violence and blood, it was well known that Hyoushin would lay down his own life — and probably that of many of his men — if Kintsusei had so commanded it. A genuine respect and affection lurked deep within his guarded heart for the only person who had shown him nothing but kindness in his chequered life, and these plots both angered and sickened him to his core.

"I will discover if any others have designs on Kintsusei-sama's life, and I will terminate those plots in the way I have before, before it reaches the stage of bloody conflict." He reflected, as he moved through the halls. "I will not be remiss again."

"Hyoushin!" As he entered the main gallery, in which many of Kintsusei's advisors were meeting, he was greeted with exclamations of surprise which soon became dismay and alarm as they registered the blood staining his cloak and armour. At their disgust, Hyoushin's eyebrow twitched slightly, and his lips thinned as he reached for his sword, drawing it and glancing at the crusting red liquid that had dried across the tip.

"Excuse my interruption, gentlemen." He said quietly, bowing his head formally towards them. "I am here on Kintsusei-sama's orders to notify you that one of your own was executed as a traitor this morning, with my Lord as witness."

Silence greeted the statement, and Hyoushin's sharp eyes darted between each of the men's expressions, searching each one of them probingly for any faint flicker that might indicate their guilt. His gaze narrowed.

"Attempts on Kintsusei-sama's life will not be tolerated." He said quietly, holding up his weapon so that they could all see the gorish mess that tainted the blade. "And I have no compunction in carrying out the necessary punishment as my lord commands it. You have been warned, gentlemen — I am Kintsusei-sama's shadow, and I am not as forgiving as he might be to lapses in judgement."

He brought his sword down in a sharp, sweeping gesture, making many of the men jump, for despite the fact they were several and he was one, most people around the palace feared Hyoushin's cold, soulless attitude and his strange tribal features. He eyed them, then he nodded.

"You know the penalty for treason against the Emperor is death." He said evenly. "Decapitation by blade. I would keep that closely in mind, before you decide to follow the example of your late colleague."

He glanced over them once more, satisfying himself that none of them had been involved in the morning's incident, and then he nodded his head.

"Lord Kintsusei is trying to save Kutou." He said frankly. "And for that, he needs your help. If you believe in Kutou's future, then you must show Kintsusei-sama faith. Else it won't just be your future that is cut short on the end of a blade. I am old enough to remember the war with Kounan, as are all of you. With such enemies outside our borders, the Lord requires loyal allies within them. Otherwise, who knows when the men of the Phoenix might choose to attack?"

He sheathed his sword, absorbing the stricken expressions that crossed several of the men's faces. He nodded.

"Bear it in mind." He murmured. "That is all, my Lords. Good day."

He bowed his head, withdrawing from the chamber, and pulling the door shut behind him, pausing against the wood to listen to the conversation that ensued.

"That man is a menace." One of the advisors said. "Floating around the palace like a ghost… speaking to us like that, as if he were a Lord in his own right, and not just a tribal upstart that the Emperor took pity on during the war. How dare he imply we have anything but Kutou's best interests at heart?"

"He is the spokesman and guardian of Kintsusei-sama, it gives him a certain power of arrogance." A second man said with a sigh. "However… treason against the Emperor…"

A moment of silence, then the sound of someone getting to his feet.

"Hyoushin conveys the Emperor's words and will." A third voice said evenly. "From the blood on his blade, one of us was fool enough to challenge the sovereignty of Seiryuu's blood-decided heir and ruler. The soldier is right — Kutou needs our unity, not our deviation. If any of us are so foolish as to plot against Kintsusei-sama, we should expect to meet Hyoushin's blade. He may seem a ghost, my friend, but his words come from our Lord, not from himself. Hyoushin does not think or act on his own impulses… we would do well to absorb his warning in full."

"Meaning what? That the Southern Lands may attack us?" The first voice sounded alarmed.

"Kounan is a stable, prosperous nation. Why would they not seek to steal land from a battered power to the East?" The third man asked. "Consider it… the border is badly defended in this time of civil unrest

and war… and now their Emperor is of age — we must be aware of the possibility of outward attack. Kintsusei-sama is not just warning us against our own treason. He is warning us against the impact such actions might have for Kutou. In light of a possible threat from the Southerners — or from Hokkan or Sairou, for that matter — we must stand as one behind our Emperor as he seeks to secure our land. Kutou has suffered much pain… surely now there must be a way to bring it relief, if we all work together?"

A faint, approving smile flicked across Hyoushin's lips as he withdrew, heading silently along the corridors to his own quarters to clean his blade and change his blood-stained cloak.

"There is no indication of hostility in the south, but it never hurts to mention it." He reflected, as he changed, glancing at his reflection in the mirror as he did so. "There is nothing like external danger to re-emphasise internal loyalty. Kintsusei-sama, forgive my ploy — however, if your advisors are focused on a potential attack from the Southern Emperor, they will be more disposed to listen to and trust in your word — and that head will not remain on its spike as a reminder forever."

He sighed, and for the briefest of instants, his expression reflected genuine apprehension.

"Yet, all this preoccupation with Kutou's deity concerns me." He admitted, reaching up to loose his queue of hair so that it fell in a silvery cascade down his back. "If it is Kintsusei-sama's wish, I will do all I can to make it a reality, whatever the cost to myself. And yet, this dragon God has done little for Kutou's benefit in previous times. My Lord may be putting himself in danger by seeking a way to awaken him."

He reached up to touch his cheek, a faint smile touching his features as he ran his finger over the faint white burn mark that adorned his skin even after so many years. It had faded, and with the pallor of his complexion, it had never been very vivid, but the mark of his former slave owner still burned beneath his touch, marking him out as property bought and sold. It had been more than twenty five years since the day he and his mother had been seperated by those men, branded and sold to unscrupulous landowners to work as free labour. As survivors of a hated tribe, noone had batted an eyelid as they had been whipped and beaten, forced to work from dawn to dusk, until all the life and spirit had been struck out of them. He had seen many of his fellows fall and die where they had worked, their bodies merely tossed into a pit as the master had cracked a whip on

the survivors, forcing them to work harder. Such memories still struck him, from time to time, and each time he brushed a finger against his scarring mark, he gave an inward murmur of thanks for the day he had met Kintsusei.

On that day, his master had been slain and the land on which he had toiled had been sacked and burnt, under the orders of a fair haired Hin on a black horse, and Hyoushin had understood for the first time the intricacies of Kutou politics — the one who had enslaved him had been one of the former Emperor's closest advisors, and as such, had been singled out in the cleansing of Kutou's governmental body that had followed the war with Kounan. In the thick of this battle, an arrow had wounded him in the arm, and as Hyoushin had prepared for his death, a young soldier had ridden out of the haze of smoke, holding out a hand to help him in a way that noone else ever had before.

Kintsusei had been a boy of fifteen then, but even as a boy, he had seen and understood the suffering of a wounded man miles from his homeland and his family.

Hyoushin lowered his hand, straightening before the mirror as he re-adjusted his armour, fastenng a fresh, clean cloak around his body as he turned his attention to his blooded sword.

Even when he had learnt that Kintsusei was the only surviving son of the old Emperor, and therefore ruler of Kutou, nothing had changed between them. And as Kintsusei had made his first progress through Kutou's bustling, war-torn capital, it had been with Hyoushin at his side.

Hyoushin frowned, glancing at his blade, then back up at himself in the mirror as inwardly he reproached himself for doubting Kintsusei's judgement.

"I will not question." He reflected. "It is not my place to question. If Kintsusei-sama requires me to die for his cause, I will do so. I will protect his life with every swing of my blade, whether I have faith in Seiryuu or not… it is not my decision to make. Kutou's future depends on my Lord's will — and I will have faith in him — that one day, this world will be at peace beneath his rule."

"It's been a good night to come out. The stars are bright this evening."

Yuuki Keisuke cast a grin up at the sky, then turned to wink at his brother in law, as they pushed open the door of the restaurant,

stepping outside. “I’m sorry that we had to shunt around time at short notice, though — Mayo’s father decided to drop by and there wasn’t much I could do about that — he couldn’t stay because he has a meeting in Osaka in the morning.”

“All’s well that ends well.” His wife said reflectively, offering him a rueful smile. “At least he remembered, which is something of a miracle in itself. Since the divorce, everything he and my mother have done has been disjointed.”

“Noone stays together any more.” Keisuke agreed with a sigh. “Except, of course, Taka and Miaka. *And* you and I, Mayo. Kids, take note — we’re your role models for the future, okay?”

“I don’t even *like* girls.” Makoto pulled a face. “They’re stupid and they sit and cry in their rooms over nothing.”

“They also brain little brothers who open their big mouths.” Hikari said darkly, and Taka sent his daughter a warning look.

“Hikari-chan…”

“I know. I know.” Hikari sighed. “Sorry.”

“So, are we heading back to ours for a drink or something, now?” Miaka suggested. “It’s closer than your place, and you’re more than welcome… or do you have to get back quickly? How long do you have the sitter there for — is she prepared to be there late, or…?”

“I said eleven, provisionally, in case we got held up.” Mayo glanced at her watch. “Sumi’s probably asleep by now — so we might as well take you up on your offer, Miaka… if you don’t mind. We’ve a little time, and it’s nice to go out without a noisy five year old in tow.”

“She’d have hated sitting still for that long.” Taka reflected. “All right, looks like that’s what we’re doing. Keisuke, are you all right driving? I would, but…”

He grinned ruefully.

“I was drinking.”

“So was I.” Keisuke reminded him, and Miaka sighed, shaking her head.

“I’ll drive.” She said resignedly, taking the keys from her brother’s grip. “Honestly, you men.”

“I want to walk.” Makoto said immediately, and Miaka stared at him as Taka laughed.

“You pipe down.” He said affectionately. “Your mother isn’t that bad a driver, and you’re too young to answer back.”

Hikari pulled a face, but she made no comment, inwardly resenting the fact that if she had made such a remark, she was sure that she would have been scolded for it. Her father’s threat still echoed in her mind, however, and she bit her tongue, instead getting into her uncle’s people carrier without any demur as her mother took the wheel. Before long they were back at the Sukunami residence — despite Makoto’s fears, the journey had gone without incident — and as soon as she was able Hikari slipped away from the family gathering, secluding herself in her bedroom as she ran over the night’s events.

“No money. No dress… and no chance to talk Dad around while he’s taking that line about the party.” She murmured, tossing her jacket against the wall of her room bad-temperedly as she sank down onto the bed. Although it had begun as a small grievance, and a doubtful one, the more she thought about it the more sure she was that Arina was right.

“Somehow… but how?” She mused. “Dad’s a no go. Mum too. I can’t ask Arina to get it for me, even if I did pay her back — if Dad found out, he’d kill me and if he saw it before the party… he’d ground me. Even if it was afterwards, he’d still… he might stop me from… so that’s no good. But how else am I going to get Haru-kun to notice me, if I don’t dress the part? Arina has a serious point… if I don’t make an effort, he’s never going to know who I am. Life’s so unfair — I swear, sometimes I wonder if Mother and Father ever really had problems like this when they were young!”

She got to her feet, moving restlessly to the door as she headed to the kitchen to get a drink, but as she passed the living room door she heard her name and she paused, a frown crossing her face.

“I don’t know what went through my mind.” Her father was saying. “But when Hikari came back at me about my parents’ divorce and everything — for a moment I was ready to correct her. As if all of those things suddenly weren’t there in my mind any more… I can’t think how else to explain it, but for a moment I didn’t even know who I was.”

“You’ve been working too hard.” Keisuke said frankly. “Now you’re getting confused… they do say stress can cause mid-life crises, you know — time to take some days off, Taka-kun.”

“No, it’s not that.” That was her mother’s voice, and Hikari strained, her curiosity overtaking the fact that she should not have

been eavesdropping on the elders' conversation. "Taka-chan, you were remembering… *Tamahome's* memories, weren't you? You were thinking of… of Sou Kishuku's family. Not… Sukunami Taka's."

A pause, and Hikari's eyes widened.

"Sou Kishuku?" She whispered. "Who or what is Sou Kishuku?"

"Yes." Her father admitted after a moment. "I… I was. For a minute all I could see was… was Yuiren and Chuuei and the others… and Father… and…"

He paused, and Hikari heard her mother sigh.

"I guess it must be confusing, when things are that way." That was Mayo, her tones matter-of-fact and thoughtful as she considered the situation. "But you are Sukunami Taka, now. Tamahome is the past, right? Another life-time ago. So you shouldn't worry too much about it. Of course you'll remember — I mean, you believe in a close family because it was something you learnt growing up. Whether you were Kishuku or Taka at the time doesn't really matter."

"I know, but since Miaka and I came back here… since I came here permanently, it's been more difficult to accept the Sukunamis as my family." Taka admitted. "As if they're not even really real — the memories, all of that — it's hard to explain. But though I tried to keep things the same… it was just… too strange. Too many conflicting thoughts. That's why I've put myself one hundred percent into *this* family — it's the only one that really makes sense. But when Hikari said it, it shook me. Just because it's easier for me to put it aside, I suppose I didn't anticipate how the children might see it."

"But Hikari and Makoto don't know about everything, because they really don't need to." Keisuke said reflectively. "It's too complicated and confusing… they'd never make sense of it, even if you did try and explain."

"I know, but it's hard to tell my fifteen year old daughter why I believe in family bonds so much, when the Sukunami family barely speak these days." Taka said wearily. "Particularly since it's mostly me who doesn't do the speaking. Or for that matter how to tell her that the reason it's so important to me is because sometimes I can't get the image out of my head, of them all, dead, in that hut…"

His voice shook slightly, and Hikari's heart clenched in her chest as she interpreted her father's meaning.

"Taka, don't." Miaka spoke comfortingly. "Yuiren and the others — it was a long time ago. Don't let Hikari's questions trouble you. She's

just a teenager and she's growing very quickly. Fifteen isn't an easy age… she probably won't bother about it again."

Hikari heard no more. Hurrying quickly away from the living room, she darted into her bedroom, shutting the sliding door behind her with a firm click as she leant up against it, breathing hard. Her eyes were wide with fear as she registered everything she had heard, and she sank down to the floor, running her fingers through her thick dark hair as she tried to understand.

"My father… is… not my father?" She whispered. "Or… at least… he is but… but who is he? Sukunami Taka…? Or… who is Sou Kishuku? What is Tamahome? What did he mean, when he talked about someone being dead… what does any of it mean?"

She swallowed hard, half-wishing that she had spirited away Arina's cigarettes.

"They've been lying. Keeping a secret." She murmured. "Sukunami Taka… is a lie? Sukunami Taka… doesn't really exist? Then who am I, then? What the hell is… is going on?"

"Hikari?" Her brother's voice from outside the door made her jump and she got to her feet, sliding the door back as she glared at him unwelcomingly.

"What do you want, you brat?" She snapped. "Can't you see that I'm busy?"

"Busy doing what? Sitting in your room?" Came Makoto's smart response.

"Are you just trying to annoy me?"

"No." Makoto shook her head. "Your stupid friend is on the phone. That's all."

He offered her a bland smile, then disappeared, and Hikari cursed, pushing her confusion out of her mind. The family phone was situated on the wall between Makoto's bedroom and her parents', and often when a friend called for her, Makoto would do his utmost to divert or interfere with the call, so she grabbed up the receiver quickly, taking a deep breath as she sought to get her composure under some kind of control.

"Hello?"

"Hi-chan? It's only me." Arina's voice came down the line. "I figured you'd be back by now — your family doesn't exactly go in for extravagant all-nighters. Did you get a chance to ask him? Or did you

chicken out?"

"I didn't chicken out, but it's a no go." Hikari sighed, her earlier resentments washing back over her senses as she remembered her conversation with her father. "He says there's no way — and he threatened to ground me if I pushed it too hard. It sucks, but that's the end of it."

"Bummer." Arina paused for a moment, as if thinking it over. Then she laughed.

"Well, do what I do. I mean, you do want to get Haru's attention, right?"

"Yes, but…"

"So borrow the money."

"I can't. Ari, if Dad found out you were lending to me…"

"Not me, stupid. Them. Your folks."

"Ari!" Hikari's eyes opened wide with alarm. "Do you know what you're even suggesting?! Besides, Mother says we don't have a spare yen till Dad is paid. And Dad said the same. They don't exactly… it's not like I… there's just no way."

"You have such a small imagination sometimes." Arina said wearily. "Hi-chan, stop being so stupid. If your parents don't have the cash lying about, well — what about that Uncle of yours? He's not too badly off, is he? And they'd never notice, not if you spirited it away and then returned it in a fortnight when you got your allowance. Would they?"

"But… that would be…"

"Relax, will you?" Arina sounded impatient. "Listen. It's only stealing if you don't give it back. I told you. Borrow it. And your Uncle is your family, right? So it's not like you're lending from me… is it?"

"No-o-o, I suppose not, but…"

"Haru-kun?"

"I know, I know." Hikari sighed. "Look, Ari, it's kinda difficult right now. I… I'll talk to you tomorrow… at school. Okay?"

"Okay, but don't forget what I said." Arina said meaningfully. "I'm serious, you know. I do it all the time and Dad's never caught on yet. Remember, this isn't just any party. This is *the* party — the one that's going to make Haru notice you. Isn't it worth a risk or two?"

“I suppose…” Hikari sighed. “All right. I’ll think it over and we’ll talk tomorrow. Later, Ari.”

“Bye, Hi-chan. Don’t think too hard… you know I’m right.” Came the reply. As Hikari slowly hung up the receiver, she bit her lip, Arina’s words rushing through her head as she did so.

“*It’s only stealing if you don’t give it back.*”

“Is that true, though?” She wondered aloud. “I mean… I know… Dad would…”

Then she frowned, remembering the conversation she had overheard.

“Hell, why am I caring what Dad thinks?” She demanded. “He’s lied to us about something and from what he said in there, it sounds like something pretty big. How dare he tell Makoto and I what to do, anyway? I don’t have to listen to him… and Ari’s right. This is important. This… is a matter of love.”

She steeled herself, her gaze straying to the end of the hallway where her uncle and aunt’s coats hung beside her own and those of her family. Her uncle, she knew, kept his wallet in the pocket of his jacket when he was visiting, because as a small girl she had often been the recipient of cash on special occasions. For some reason, this memory made her pause, as if she was tainting the recollection of her four year old self trailing in anticipation after him to receive her prize. Then she gave herself an inward shake.

“I’m borrowing it.” She murmured. “That’s all. Just borrowing it. I’ll pay it back, just as soon as I get my allowance. It’s not as if… as if I’m stealing.”

After repeating this to herself a few times, Hikari got up the courage to approach the jacket, fingering the wrinkled fabric between her fingers before slipping a hand down deep into the inner pocket. The wallet was there, as she had known it would be, and it seemed to burn against her fingers as she touched it, as though disapproving of her desperate act.

“But they don’t understand.” She muttered to herself. “It’s hard enough living up to a friend like Arina as it is, with her confidence and prettiness and Mum and Dad don’t remember how difficult it is to fit in. They’re happy-go-lucky in love in as much of a sickening way as they probably were when they got together and they don’t know… they just don’t know what it’s really like to have to fight for something. Even if Dad didn’t say he loved Mum at first, I bet he

buckled pretty soon after. It's not that easy for everyone — if they understood that, then…"

She faltered, drawing the wallet out and glancing at it, before unfastening the catch and flipping it open. Several bills greeted her, along with the smiling face on her uncle's driver's licence and she frowned, pushing away that strange sensation of guilt once more as she met his pixelised gaze.

"Just..till I have the money." She whispered, more to convince herself than anything. "That's all. Just… till then."

With that thought in mind, she slipped a handful of the bills out, counting them briefly then folding them in half as she returned Keisuke's wallet to his jacket. As she turned, however, she suddenly realised that she was no longer alone, and she let out a shriek, jumping backwards against the wall as she met the disbelieving gaze of her mother. The money burned against her fingers as she swallowed hard, struggling to find words to explain what she had been doing, but none came, and for a moment she just stood there, her face draining of colour as she met her mother's horrified hazel eyes with defiant, troubled ones of her own.

As the silence continued, the door of the living room opened and Taka stepped out, stopping dead as he regarded first his wife and then his eldest child. His brow furrowed in confusion, and he rested a gentle hand on Miaka's arm, eying her in consternation.

"Miaka-chan? What's wrong?" He asked softly. At this Miaka seemed to stir, gazing up at him without a word, and Hikari's heart leapt in her throat as she saw the glitter of tears on her mother's lashes. She bit her lip, knowing she was cornered and yet still she did not speak or move, Keisuke's money still burning against her palm.

As Taka glanced towards her, he seemed to see the tell-tale bills clutched in her hand, and his eyes widened. His gaze strayed to Keisuke's disturbed jacket, then back to his daughter, and for a moment Hikari was chilled to the bone by the look of anger and dismay that reflected in his violet eyes. He released his touch on his wife's shoulders, stepping forward and holding out his hand.

"Give it to me."

There was no emotion in his voice, and Hikari stared at him like a frightened rabbit, unable to do more than just stand there. At her lack of response, Taka's eyes narrowed, and he crossed the hall towards her, taking her hand in his and prising the money from it. Too disturbed now to even react, Hikari did not try to stop him, merely

watching in scared silence as Taka carefully counted the bills. His frown deepened.

“Is this all of it?” He asked, in the same flat, even tone as before. Slowly and jerkily Hikari nodded.

“From your Uncle’s coat?”

Again, Hikari nodded her head. Taka’s expression became unreadable, and he glanced at the money, then back at her.

“Go to your room.” He said softly. “We’ll talk about this later . I won’t have your Aunt’s birthday ruined by you, Hikari — but we will talk about this. Trust me.”

Hikari did not react for a moment, too shaken by the whole encounter to properly respond. Then, as Taka gave her a little nudge in the direction of her bedroom, she seemed to find her feet, fleeing for the safety of her chamber and the comfort of her pillow as she threw herself down on her bed, her emotions finally spilling over into anger and despair. She had never, in all of her fifteen years, seen her father look that way, and it had frightened her more than she liked to admit. But more, she was angry at herself — for deep down she knew that taking the money would always have been wrong, no matter what Arina had said about it.

“So what will they do to me, now?” She wondered, as she clutched the pillow to her, tears still coursing down her cheeks. “What will happen… what will they *do*?”

“I can’t believe it.”

As Taka returned the money to the wallet, he cast his wife a troubled look, seeing no comfort in her distressed hazel eyes. “Miaka… tell me… did I… jump to conclusions? Was there something…?”

Slowly Miaka shook her head.

“I saw… her take the money out.” She said unsteadily, and Taka could tell that his wife was fighting to control her tears. “Taka, what have we done wrong? Why would she do something like this — why? Do you think she’s involved in something — something bad? Something dangerous? Why else would she need money? Is she being bullied — is that what’s going on?”

“We’ll find that out from Hikari, when Keisuke and Mayo have left.” Taka said quietly. “But for now, Miaka, try not to show it in your

face. Whether we tell him or not, I won't have Mayo's birthday ruined by it… they don't need to know right now."

"Miaka? Taka? Are you having a conference out here?" At that moment, Keisuke poked his head around the door, making both jump, and at their expressions, he frowned.

"Is something wrong? Miaka, you look…"

"I got something in my eye… Taka was trying to get it out, but he went and stuck his great big thumb in instead." Miaka said quickly, offering her brother a smile. "I'm sorry… we were on our way back. It's gone now — just dust."

"Well, I was just going to say that Mayo and I should be heading back." Keisuke sent her a thoughtful look, but said nothing more, much to Taka's relief. "It's about half ten, but we don't want to risk traffic and being late and all… plus, if Sumi wakes up, she'll want to know where we are and why we're not back. She gets kind of possessive at night, when she's on her own — five year olds and being scared of monsters in the dark — something like that."

"One too many tales of Suzaku flying over Tokyo, perhaps." Taka suggested lightly, and Keisuke looked rueful.

"Perhaps." He admitted. "Even so, we should be going. Will you tell Hikari and Makoto goodbye for us? We won't disturb them — but it was lovely having them there tonight. I know Mayo really appreciated them coming."

This was almost too much for Miaka, who swallowed hard, nodding her head, and Taka forced a smile onto his own face.

"Sure." He agreed easily. "We'll pass the message on, don't worry. Have a safe trip, both of you."

"Thank you for tonight, Miaka, Taka." Mayo emerged herself at that point, grabbing her coat from the stand as her husband slipped on his own jacket, blissfully unaware of how much controversy it had already caused. "We've had a great time and it's nice to know some of my family care to remember when I was born."

She winked.

"We'll see you soon. Miaka, I'll call you and we'll arrange a day to get together over those books I wanted to ask you about — all right?"

"For sure." Miaka nodded her head. "Thank you, Mayo… have a safe journey home."

As they closed the door, Miaka sighed, leaning up against the wood and closing her eyes.

“I’m glad they’re gone, but…” She trailed off, and Taka nodded, taking her gently by the shoulders and kissing her on the forehead.

“Leave it to me.” He suggested. “I’ll talk to her. Don’t upset yourself — I can handle it.”

“But…” Miaka sighed, then shook her head. “This is about both of us, though, Taka. We must have done something wrong. Do you think… do you think she’s done this before?”

“We’ll ask her.” Taka said evenly. “Come on. The sooner we hash this out, the better. But I’m angry with her, Miaka. Very angry, considering the conversation we already had about money and whatnot this evening. That she’d try and take cash from Keisuke, on her Aunt’s birthday, no less… I’m furious with her.”

“Taka, she’s only a kid, and she must have had reasons.” Miaka said softly. Taka frowned, shaking his head.

“Her reasons are that she didn’t get her own way so she sought a different approach.” He said frankly. “She’s fifteen. Fifteen is almost grown up. I would have married you when you were fifteen, Miaka — or had you forgotten about that? In the world I grew up in, fifteen was plenty old enough to take responsibility.”

“Taka…” Miaka’s eyes widened at his words, and she shook her head. “Taka, you grew up in *this* world. Not… not that one. Remember?”

Taka stared at her, then he cursed, rubbing his brow absently as he did so.

“I’m doing it again.” He realised. “Thinking Tamahome’s thoughts, not Sukunami Taka’s.”

“But you’re both of them — that’s stupid, they’re the same man and they always have been.” Miaka objected. Taka frowned, shaking his head.

“Taka was created to give Tamahome a future in this world.” He murmured. “And Taka is happy being Taka, but Taka is still Tamahome. I guess finding the balance is a little difficult sometimes, when there are two lots of memories to equate to one life. That’s all.”

He rubbed his brow again, and Miaka shot him a concerned look.

“Do you have a headache?”

“No… no.” Taka shook his head. “It just… feels like my skin is burning. That’s all.”

He faltered, then,

“Miaka, my character… the *oni* mark… it isn’t…?”

“No, it isn’t.” Miaka shook her head, eying him in consternation. “All of that was a lifetime ago — a world away from where we are now, like Mayo said.”

“I know. And we have Hikari to deal with.” Taka nodded. “Which is more important now.”

“You… aren’t going to go back into the book?” Miaka looked alarmed. “Taka…”

“What’s the point?” Taka said sadly “Who’d be there now to greet us? Think logically — we don’t know how much time has passed since Mayo and I were there. Three years passed as ten in their world that time. Who knows how long *fifteen* years has been? Chichiri, Tasuki, everything we remember — might well be dead and gone. I don’t want to go back there — not with that in mind.”

“Good.” Miaka sighed, leaning up against him. “Because I can’t go there now, and… and I don’t want to lose you again. That’s all.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Taka promised. “But I am going to speak to Hikari. And be firm, too, Miaka. Whether you want to believe she had a reason or not, it still doesn’t excuse it. I know she’s a teenager, but of late, her attitude has been… funny. And it’s time we took her in hand, before it gets worse. She has to understand that you don’t get anything in this world unless you work for it… and that neither of us are going to tolerate covert theft.”

Miaka looked troubled, but she nodded her head.

“All right.” She said softly. “Then let’s go see what she has to say.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Four

It seemed forever before Hikari heard the click of the front door and the sound of her Uncle's car as they pulled away from the apartment building. Peering out of the window at the darkened street below, she decided that she had never felt so miserable in her life. She had never seen her father look quite so angry, and yet, inside of her heart, she was angry too — deceived, about something important in her family's past.

"Hikari."

At length, the knock on the door came, and Hikari swallowed hard, huddling back against the bedhead as it slid back, revealing the troubled face of her mother. Finding she was decently dressed, Miaka entered the chamber properly, her husband in tow, and as she caught her father's eyes once more, any words Hikari might have found in her own defence died on her lips.

For a moment, there was silence. Then Taka sighed.

"Would you mind explaining to us what you thought you were doing?" He asked softly.

Hikari remained silent, glancing at her hands as she felt hot colour flushing into her cheeks.

"Are you in some kind of trouble, musume-chan?" Miaka's voice was anxious, and something about the genuine concern in the woman's voice brought tears to Hikari's dark eyes. Slowly she shook her head, still not trusting herself to raise her gaze.

"Then tell us." Taka said quietly. "Why were you taking money from your uncle's wallet?"

Hikari swallowed again, hugging her knees to her chest.

"I was… only going to… borrow it." She said haltingly, and from the silence that followed, she knew her father had been unimpressed.

"Borrowing without permission is stealing, Hikari." He said quietly. "You know that — or at least, I hope you do, considering you're our daughter and we've raised you better than that. This family don't have a lot of money, we all know that — but even so… to do something…

and to your Uncle, on your Aunt's birthday…"

He trailed off, and Hikari flinched at the censure in his tones.

"Let her explain." Miaka begged. "Taka, give her a chance to speak. There must be a reason… Hikari-chan, tell us. Why did you take the money?"

At this, Hikari raised her head to her mother hesitantly.

"I wanted… Haru-kun… to notice me." She whispered. Taka's eyes widened.

"So, because I told you you couldn't have your allowance early, you decided to take matters into your own hands?" He demanded.

"Taka, Hikari's got a crush." Miaka murmured. "You know… what people will do… when they're in love."

Taka's eyes narrowed and he shook his head.

"No, Miaka. It won't do." He said flatly. "Our children do not steal. Our children, dammit, know right from wrong. I don't care if it was inspired by some teenage fancy — even so…"

"How the hell do you suppose it feels, then, to never ever be noticed because everyone else always has the latest things ages before I do!" At this Hikari's temper flared and she glared at her father, hands on her hips as her resentment rushed through her. "And you don't understand — you've never understood. You don't even remember what it's like to be fifteen — I bet you don't! You don't know how many things depend on how you look and what you wear and how you act… and you have no clue how much pressure that is! I only wanted to borrow it and I was going to pay it back! I wasn't stealing it — I wouldn't do that!"

"Taking without permission is always stealing. No matter how you gloss it over." Taka shook his head slightly. "You're wiser than that, Hikari. And as for being fifteen… as for that… do you really think your mother and I have lived charmed lives? That we never had troubles to overcome? You're naive, if you really think so."

He sighed, rubbing his forehead, and Hikari noticed her mother send him an anxious look, slipping her arm around his shoulders as she did so.

"Taka?" She murmured, and Taka shook his head.

"I'm fine. I'm fine. I just… this is…" He sighed heavily, meeting Hikari's gaze with a reproving one of his own.

“Every penny I ever had when I was your age went to my family.” He said quietly. “And I worked myself to the bone to get it, too. It might be true that you don’t get the latest fashions the minute they come out, but Hikari, those who judge you on the way you look really aren’t people you should be bothering with. And if you’re so weak… so stupid as to believe that a dress — or whatever it is — is going to change your life…”

He trailed off, rubbing his brow again, and a fresh flare of indignation rose inside of Hikari’s heart.

“You’re lying to me.” She said bitterly. “How dare you stand there and damn well lie to me, and preach about money and hardship and whatever else? Your family weren’t that badly off. You never had a job till you were sixteen, you’ve told me that yourself! So I did something you don’t like — well big deal already! If you can’t even tell me the truth, why the hell should I listen to you about anything else? Far as I know, that all could be a lie, too! Far as I know you might not even be my father!”

At this Miaka’s eyes almost dropped out of her head, and Taka reeled back as if struck, colour draining from his cheeks as he regarded his daughter as if seeing her for the first time.

“Hikari…”

“Hikari, take that back right now.” Miaka said firmly, for once the first to react. “You’ve no right to say things like that to your father… even if you’re hurt and angry, you’ve no business…”

“It’s all right for you.” Hikari’s voice shook. “*You* don’t care if we have money or if we don’t. You don’t even care whether he’s really Sukunami Taka or if he’s some other guy. Obaachan’s never liked him — you and she barely speak because you married him — is this why? Because he’s got some kind of secret and you don’t want us to know? That we have no money because Sukunami Taka is a big fat lie and Obaachan tried to stop it happening!? *You* just sit and accept it all and you lie to us, too, Mother. To Makoto *and* I. Which is ironic, isn’t it? That you named your son ‘truth’, when you can’t even tell us the truth about our family?”

“What are you talking about?” Taka demanded. “This has nothing to do with your mother or I, or her relationship with your Grandmother. It has to do with *you*, and the way you’ve behaved this evening.”

“Yes it does! Right now I don’t even know if I’m even Sukunami Hikari, or if that’s a lie too!”

“Of course you’re Sukunami Hikari, you silly girl! Who else would you be?”

“I don’t know. But if that’s true, and if you’re *not* Sukunami Taka, then you’re obviously *not* my father and I don’t care what you say to me.” Hikari was too angry and upset now to care what she was saying. “I *heard* you! I heard you talking, about some other guy and some other life and I know you’ve been lying to the two of us for as long as we’ve been alive. *Both* of you! So don’t you tell me what to do and what not to do. If you can’t even tell us the truth then *I don’t care what you think*!”

It was impossible for Taka to lose any more colour, and he sank down onto the end of the bed, eying her in abject horror. His reaction only served to both confirm and fuel Hikari’s paranoia, and she grabbed her jacket, throwing it over her shoulders as she scooped up her door keys.

“I’m going to Arina’s house.” She said coldly. “I don’t care what you do. If you’re not Sukunami Taka, I don’t care at all. I’m going to Arina’s and I’m going to stay there, because her family aren’t complete mental cases who lie about who they really are!”

“Hikari!” Miaka grabbed her by the arm, but Hikari pushed her off, sliding back the door and stalking into the corridor. At the commotion, Makoto emerged from his room, eyes wide behind his reading glasses, but Hikari paid him no attention, slipping back the catch on the apartment’s front door as she slid her feet into her shoes.

“Hikari, get back here right this instant!” Taka exclaimed, gathering his composure, but Hikari was riled and she acted as though he had not spoken, throwing the door open and marching purposefully down the corridor towards the stairwell. Taka hurried after her, Miaka in tow, but she quickened her pace, hurrying through the double doors and down the flights of steps towards the main entrance of the apartment building. Behind her, she heard her father yell and then her mother exclaim, but as she reached the door she realised they were no longer following her. She placed her hand against the main exit, hardening her resolve as she reflected bitterly that they obviously didn’t care that much what she did.

“Or they’d at least come after me.” She murmured. “Just like my exams — they don’t care. Well, fine. I’ll go to Arina’s and see if I care what happens about it. When she knows what happened, she’ll back me up… and when I tell her about my Dad…”

Her brows knitted together, and she gathered her composure,

stepping out into the darkness outside and hurrying along the main street towards the bus stop. It was late and as she reached the bus stop, she realised she did not have any money for the fare, so she gave up on this plan, instead turning towards the alleyway which led to Arina's more illustrious part of town.

As she headed through the black streets, she was struck by how eerie the city was at night, in the pathways that, during the day, she travelled without even a second thought. Inwardly she regretted not taking a more busy route, and as she heard footsteps on the path behind her she quickened her pace, heart in her throat as she remembered the fact that people had been known to be robbed in these streets after dark. Not daring to turn around, Hikari was aware that the steps on her tail quickened to keep up with her, and she swallowed hard, breaking into a run as she sought to reach the better lit city district up ahead.

As she broke into the busier high street, she let out a sigh of relief, now risking a glance over her shoulder, but she could see nothing and she half wondered whether she had imagined it in the first place.

"My nerves are shot." She murmured, wishing for the second time that evening that she had taken cigarettes from Arina when she had left. "It's a good twelve blocks more to Ari's house… oh well. She won't turn me back, I'm sure. She'll be on my side."

As she passed people on the street, something flashed out of the corner of her eye and she turned, trying to make out what had given the sudden strange flare of reddish light. Nothing seemed out of place, however, and she frowned, rubbing her temples.

"Am I losing my mind?" She muttered. "I'm seeing things."

"Even as the words left her mouth, however, she saw something glimmer in the blackness and as she squinted, struggling to make it out, she was sure she saw — for the briefest of instants — the ghostly form of a red bird spreading it's wings above the National Library. At her gaze, it arched it's neck, opening it's beak as if to let out a cry to the heavens. Then, in a glittering burst of red shards it was gone, and Hikari swallowed hard. A quick glance at her fellow pedestrians indicated that noone else had seen anything amiss, and now quite sure the argument had addled her brain somehow, she inched cautiously towards the library building, taking it in with a wary glance to either side.

It was nearly eleven, now, but the lights were still on and as she drew closer, she realised that an event was in progress, with people

still going in and out despite the late hour. Posters on billboards outside advertised a 'Journey into Ancient China', and she drew breath sharply as she realised that one of the posters had the image of a red bird drawn elegantly over the slick Chinese characters.

"That bird." She murmured, faltering, and then making her way up the steps, pushing open the Library door and stepping into the front foyer. "What is… that bird?"

"Good evening, miss." A young man with an arm full of brochures and pamphlets greeted her with a smart bow at the door, and startled, Hikari returned it with a clumsy one of her own, accepting one of the sheets he offered her with a slight smile. As he turned to greet the next entering people, she glanced over the leaflet, running her gaze over it until she found what she was looking for.

"The red bird." She whispered. 'Just like over the Library just now. Oh!' As a sudden thought struck her. "Oh, Hikari, you are an idiot! This is a special event, right? That bird you saw was some kind of special effect — some kind of light show. It's probably playing on loop — that's why noone else paid it any attention. Yeesh, what did you think it was — some kind of ghost? You really need to lay off the nicotine, seriously… whoever heard of a giant ghost bird in Tokyo anyway?"

She moved forward into the room where the display was being organised, glancing with only vague interest at the photos and sketches of ancient Chinese artefacts and history. As she glanced around her, her heart caught in her throat as she recognised her Uncle's closest friend, Hajiwara Tetsuya, along with his wife, Yui, her mother's own long-time childhood friend. Cursing, she ducked into a side corridor before either of them saw her, taking a deep breath as she leant up against the wall.

"I never knew Tetsuya-san was interested in ancient Chinese junk. Guess it isn't just Uncle Keisuke who obsesses about this weird stuff." She decided with a sigh. "Great. Now how am I going to get out of here without them seeing me? I know Yui-san won't let me stay here if she realises I'm out alone — and she's hard to argue with. She'd just take me right back home and I am *not* going home tonight! Let Mum and Dad worry about me — it's about time they did, for once!"

She inched along the hallway, spying a stairway at the furthest end and as she drew closer, she was aware of a door at the very top, marked with a white and black decal. Curious, she made her way up the steps, and as she reached the top, she could make out the kanji's meaning. She frowned.

“Important Documents Room, huh?” She muttered. “Well. That sounds sufficiently boring for me to hide out until I can be sure the coast’s clear. So long as it isn’t locked… but noone’s around up here. I can sneak in and noone will know. Then when it’s quieter, I’ll get out. It’ll be okay — I’ll just listen for the closing announcement, and get out then. If Mum and Dad worry a little about me, so be it. They’ll only go right to Arina, anyway, and if I don’t show up there right away, they might think twice about treating me like some little kid.”

She pushed against the door, a smile touching her lips as she realised it was open, and she slipped inside, reaching up to flick on the light. It flared into life almost immediately, revealing a dusty room filled to the furthest inch with shelves of old, worn looking books, and she pulled a graphic face.

“Yep. Just as I thought. Boredom city.” She murmured. “But well away from the display thing downstairs, thank goodness. Noone will look for me in a Library, either. Mum and Dad will never even think that I would come here.”

She moved between the shelves, running her finger absently against some of the books as she did so.

“Some of these have been here years, I bet.” She murmured. “Shoved away where noone ever reads them. I wonder what the big attraction is. I mean, are these really so important that they have to be kept locked away?”

She pulled one from the shelf, eying it’s worn red covers disparagingly.

“They sure don’t look like much to me. Just beat up old books. That’s all.”

“*Damn* that guy!”

A sudden exclamation from outside the door made her start, dropping the book to the floor with a thud as she glanced in fear towards the door, half expecting to be discovered. However, despite a rattle at the door, noone entered the room, and Hikari held her breath, not daring to move.

“Unlocked again! I’ll *kill* him!” The man’s voice muttered, and then there was the sound of a key turning in a lock. Hikari’s eyes widened with alarm as she heard footsteps making their way away down the hall, and all pretence of secrecy gone, she hurried to the door, struggling with the handle in vain.

“Locked!” She whispered. “Oh, dammit. Now I guess I am spending

the night in the library! Brilliant — I should have at least brought a blanket with me — it's cold in here!"

She stifled a shiver, uttering a sigh as she bent to scoop up the fallen book, making to return it to the shelf. As she did so, however, it fell open, and Hikari's eyes opened wide as she registered the condition of the pages inside.

"Black…?" She murmured, hesitating, then brushing her fingers against the page. "No words, just… black?"

As her skin made contact with the strange ebony surface, a sudden image of the vermillion bird flooded her mind and she let out a gasp as her whole body seemed to be engulfed in hot, red fire. She made to loosen her grip on the book, but it was to no avail, and as the world seemed to dissolve into red light, Hikari closed her eyes, terrified as everything began to twist and swirl though her mind. For a moment, there was nothing but shimmering red flames, and then, in an instant, she was engulfed in choking darkness.

It had been some years since Kintsusei had spent any amount of time in this part of the palace.

As he made his way slowly along the hallways, Hyoushin's guards trailing him obediently in case of attack, Kintsusei found his mind flitting back to the past — to the time when the hallways had led to something more than just a series of chambers dead and deserted by the ones who had once lived there. This section of the palace had belonged to the royal harem of his father, which, with some bitterness Kintsusei knew had been more like a brothel than anything else. His father had had diverse tastes, not confining himself to one woman or even to women in general, and it had been of one of the hapless women called here that Kintsusei himself had been born.

The memory was still cold against his senses, for his mother had not been one of the former Emperor's favoured concubines, and even though she had borne him a son, there had been other children and other women more beautiful and alluring for the man to foist his attentions on. Kintsusei's mother had been eighteen at his birth, but already, by that time, she had been treated like nothing more than a plaything to her master, and in the end, she had been unable to bear it any longer. When Kintsusei had been seven, she had been found dead in her chamber, blood at her wrists and a blade still clutched in her stained fingers. She had been driven to it, Kintsusei knew, by the antics of his father, and that above anything had made him hate the

former Emperor with passion. It had been then, orphaned and without the protection of his mother, that he had first entered the military training program, and had exchanged his life as a dubious Prince to a man of the Kutou army. In fact, until Nakago had decided to cleanse the entire palace of every living person he could, Kintsusei's claim to Kutou's throne would have been an impossibility. Yet here he was, almost twenty years later, walking the halls in the hallowed position of leader of Kutou.

He smiled sadly.

The irony of it was not lost on him.

"Kikei, why have you brought me to this part of the palace?" He asked now, and the priest paused, turning to offer his master a smile.

"Because it is the right place to come." He said vaguely. "My Lord, if you will keep a little faith…"

"There are no women in this place now. The harem has long since been destroyed, and I have not formed one of my own." Kintsusei frowned. "What earthly use else can this place have to me?"

"My Lord is impatient to discover a means to save Kutou." Kikei observed evenly. "This I understand. But if I can ask you to indulge me with your patience a little longer, Lord Kintsusei…"

He trailed off, gesturing to a doorway that led off the passage, and Kintsusei frowned, hesitating, then nodding his head.

"Very well." He agreed. "If this does indeed bear some relevance to our earlier conversation."

"Indeed, Kintsusei-sama." Kikei nodded his head, pushing the door back with a soft creak and stepping into the darkness. Kintsusei faltered for a moment, then turned to the accompanying guards, offering them a smile.

"Wait for me here." He instructed. "Let none enter, unless they be your commander come to make report to me."

"Yes, sir." The men bowed, and not without misgivings, Kintsusei followed Kikei into the darkened room.

It had once been a day parlour for the women of the court, but now, in the dim light of sconced torches it looked more like some kind of shrine. As Kintsusei gazed around him, he realised that several texts and writings from the ransacked royal library had made their way here, and at the surprise in his expression, Kikei nodded.

“I salvaged what I could, my Lord, when fire devoured that part of the palace.” He agreed soberly. “To protect your history, in case it should ever prove useful to you.”

“I see.” Kintsusei nodded his head. “And you think that now is the time that it will?”

“Yes, Lord.” Kikei offered him another heavy-lidded smile. “Since you seek to summon Seiryuu, and gain the protection of the Beast Gods for Kutou.”

“Yes, I do.” Kintsusei sighed heavily. “I want to stop people dying like they are, Kikei. Is that too much to wish for? That this land be as calm and as tranquil as our neighbours to the North and the South? Hokkan has been at peace for generations, despite the fact they are more ethnically diverse than even we are, in this land. And Kounan… the southern land has been ruled by a child for the past few years, yet they have encountered few troubles like the ones I see on a regular basis. Innocent people dying, Kikei — as Emperor, should I not be able to stop that?”

“Indeed, I understand your feelings, sire.” Kikei agreed. “Your sentiments for Kutou have always been uppermost in your mind, since the day I first placed the crown on your head. And with my help, I hope, your dream can become a reality.”

“You spoke of ancient scribings? Something about shards of magic — something about power?”

“Yes.” Kikei inclined his head, gesturing to the table in the middle of the room as he flicked open the heavy covers of a large, ancient book. “This is why I sought your company here today, Kintsusei-sama. This is the legend of Suiko — of Seiryuu’s original pact with this world, and the protection that he promised to give to Kutou in exchange for the land’s fidelity.”

“Then, judging by the way Kutou has been, the faith of the people must be weak indeed.” Kintsusei sighed heavily, coming to stand beside the ponderous form of the old priest as he gazed over the text himself. “What is this Suiko, Kikei? I don’t believe you mentioned that before… is it a person? Someone we should seek?”

“Yes, sire, but not a person, as such.” Kikei smiled, brushing the page with his hand. “If my Lord would read, I think he would understand.”

“*And in the coming of Seiryuu, Lord of the Eastern Lands, the people rejoiced for they had been saved by his power and strength*.” Kintsusei

murmured, running his finger alongside the columns of text as he sought to understand. "*And in order that their land might be so preserved for generations, the benevolent Dragon God gave to the Eastern Lands a scale from his form, glimmering and glittering in the sunlight as he cast over it his blessing. The Priests of the Azure Dragon took the scale and sealed it in the safety of a deep, hidden shrine, so that it would always remain within Kutou and always grant her the protection of Seiryuu, God of the East. And when he saw this, Seiryuu was pleased, and promised the men of the Eastern Lands that, if his power should ever be needed to protect his people, he would send to them a Priestess — a girl born of a world beyond his own, with the power to wake him from his sleep and call on him to rise once more to Kutou's defence. This he promised his people, who had worshipped him so loyally even in their times of drought.*

And as Seiryuu returned to the water from whence he came, he commanded that the power within the sacred scale be enough to watch over the Eastern Lands, and that the Shrine of the Scale should never be without guard. He decreed that, with the coming of the Priestess, and the leaving of the Holy Relic, the Guardian of Kutou could be awakened and blessed into human form, to fight and defend her country and to keep the land at peace for all time to come. This being he named Suiko, servant of Seiryuu, and the people promised that they would do exactly as he had asked.

With this in mind, Seiryuu withdrew from this world, until such time as his divine power was needed once again."

"Do you understand now, sire, what power drives this land's stability?"

"I don't know." Kintsusei frowned. "So Seiryuu left a scale behind in Kutou, after his first coming to this land. And this scale has the power to… do what? To guard Kutou? To fight for Kutou? To… to bring peace to my people?"

"Tenkou's interference has cost all of the four lands dearly." Kikei admitted. "It's my belief that the four mages are no longer as strong as they were originally designed to be. But that there still exists a Shrine of the Scale, that I am quite sure. And that the relic of Suiko remains there, this also seems likely to my mind. Raising the mage from her sleep is the next step in protecting Kutou, sire — Seiryuu's own appointed guardian of ancient times. What better soldier could you have on your team, than one put here by the God himself?"

"What indeed." Kintsusei rubbed his chin, then he nodded.

"I see your reasoning." He admitted. "But how do we find such a thing? The text says that it's buried somewhere hidden. Can we find

it? And when we have it… will we be able to rise this spirit, as you suggest?"

"If I may be so bold, sire, I believe the whereabouts of the hidden shrine are not so secret." Kikei pursed his lips. "Some of these documents refer to an ancient cave… in fact, a cave with which you are more than a little acquainted. Old texts refer to Suiko's shrine as being water on one side and desert on the other, with darkness at day and darkness at night. That it is somewhere in the underground world of lakes and streams beneath this nation, I have no doubt. Caverns in which you played in, as a boy… and where, if I might be so brave as to elicit the memory, you once took a wounded man, when in the thick of battle."

"Hyoushin." Kintsusei's eyes widened with surprise. "The blessed spring… is that where you think it is? That the water I used to tend Hyoushin's blooded arm was, in fact, charmed by Seiryuu's presence, and that's why he made such a good recovery, even from such a serious arrow wound?"

"It is my conjecture, sire, yes."

"Then we must not delay any longer." Kintsusei made up his mind. "If all you have told me is true, Kikei, obtaining that scale seems of the utmost importance. The text mentions a Holy Relic and that must be the Shinzahou that Yui-sama left when she was here in Kutou. If we can stir this guardian spirit Suiko, maybe she can tell us where to find that. And then, with that… surely we will be some way towards bringing Kutou to peace?"

"As you say, sire." Kikei bowed his head in his master's direction, and Kintsusei nodded, resolution flickering in his dark eyes.

"Very well." He said frankly. "Then I shall send Hyoushin to find the scale at once. He must remember the location of that place, even as others might not — Hyoushin's memory is generally unquestionable, and I'm sure he'd locate the artefact without any hesitation."

"Will Your Highness's person be quite secure here, without Hyoushin's constant vigil?" Kikei asked softly. Kintsusei shrugged.

"I was raised a soldier. I can fight, that's why I've lived this long." He said evenly. "Besides, Hyoushin is the only one I trust — aside from you, Kikei, and you are no man of arms. It must be Hyoushin — otherwise I'd fear that an enemy was plotting to relieve me of it, and any chance of bringing Kutou to peace."

“In those terms, sire, I understand your reason.” Kikei inclined his head gravely. “I would gladly go myself, but as you say, I am no man of arms.”

“Then let’s go.” Kintsusei shut the volume with a snap. “We have no time to lose. The sooner he can leave, the sooner we can begin. And the sooner we can raise Seiryuu and all his divine brethren to the defence of this world’s peace!”

“Taka!”

As Hikari had disappeared through the doors of the stairwell, Taka had stumbled, the world swaying and twisting before him as he put his hands out to steady his fall. The burning sensation that had plagued him on and off suddenly came back in full force, and as Miaka crouched at his side, he took a deep breath, struggling to quell the swirling emotions within him.

“Go… after her.” He murmured. “Miaka… go after her!”

“Taka, you’re white as a…” Miaka trailed off, her eyes opening wide with alarm and at her expression, Taka frowned, putting his fingers tentatively against his brow.

“A *ghost*?” He whispered, and wordlessly Miaka nodded her head.

“Hikari…”

“Mother? Father? What’s going on? What has Hikari done?” Makoto’s voice startled both of them and Miaka turned to face her son, biting her lip as anxiety flooded her expression.

“Nothing that’s any of your business, Mako-kun.” She said softly. “Go back to your room, and stay there. All right? This has nothing to do with you.”

“Is father… all right?” The apprehension in the young boy’s tone brought Taka back to himself and as the burning subsided, he struggled to his feet, turning to face his son with a sober smile. He nodded.

“I just tripped over my own feet. Nothing more.” He assured him. “Do as your mother says, Makoto. I have to go find your sister.”

Makoto opened his mouth to protest, but at the look in his father’s eyes he decided better of it, and without a word he returned to his room, shutting the door behind him with a click.

Once he was gone, Miaka raised troubled hazel eyes to her

husband's.

"For a minute, the *oni* mark was on your brow." She whispered. "Taka, what does it mean? What about Hikari?"

"I need to go find her." Taka said firmly. "Stupid or not, we can't let her run riot around the city at this time… she needs to know that it's dangerous and I don't want her to get hurt."

"You're still pale. Let me go." Miaka begged. "Or at least, let me come with you."

Taka hesitated, then nodded his head, taking his wife by the hand as he reached for his jacket.

"All right." He agreed slowly. "She can't have gone far, anyway. Two pairs of eyes are better than one."

"Taka, about what she said… what she heard." Miaka said uneasily, and Taka nodded grimly, pushing open the door of the stairwell as something prickled gently against his brow once more.

"I know. It's a problem." He admitted. "But even so, what's happened tonight — let's resolve the attitude and the stealing, first. Then, if things are still uneasy, maybe we'll talk to her about the… book. For now, though… finding her is more important. If she's headed to Arina's house, we should drive out that way and see if we can head her off."

"I'll drive." Miaka volunteered. "I didn't drink anything this evening, and you… I'm still not sure you're all right, Taka."

"Me either." Taka owned. "I mean, I feel fine now, but I've never felt like that before. Like my character was burning through my skin — it's never hurt before. It's like an omen — and in this world, it shouldn't even… be there. It hasn't been, for a long time. For… for years and years. I'm Sukunami Taka — aren't I?"

"Yes." Miaka agreed, as they hurried down the stairwell towards the main entrance. "But you;re still Tamahome. Taka, what if the character appears again? How will you explain that to Makoto — to anyone?"

"I don't know." Taka admitted. "As I said, it's a problem. But…"

"You promised me you wouldn't go back into the book." Miaka reminded him, and Taka nodded.

"I know, and I'll keep that promise." He replied. "But I don't like that I've been feeling this way. That Tamahome's memories are

overtaking Sukunami Taka's and now the *oni* mark… It makes me worried. Worried that something is… going to happen. Or even already has happened… somehow."

Miaka frowned, slipping her hand into her pocket as she fumbled for her car keys.

"For now, we find Hikari." She said firmly. "Then, tomorrrow, we'll talk to Keisuke and Tetsuya and see if they have any ideas. So long as you're not going back into that world, and so long as we can find our daughter… we'll work everything out, right? That's all that matters right at the moment."

"Right." Taka's gaze flitted briefly to the heavens, and as he gazed at them, he frowned, rubbing his eyes as if to clear them.

"Taka?"

"Nothing." Taka offered her a slight smile. "Let's go track down the little horror, all right? Honestly, behaving like that… I don't know which of us she got it from."

Miaka frowned, but made no response, putting the car in gear as she drew out of the parking lot and Taka frowned, his eyes going back to the sky as she did so. Briefly, he thought he had seen the image of a red bird, ghostly and pale against the night's darkness, but now it was gone, and he wondered if he had imagined it.

As they reached the end of the road, however, a suffocating sensation overwhelmed him and the car jerked forward as Miaka suddenly slammed her foot on the brake.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then, slowly, they met gazes, seeing the same horror and dismay reflected in the other's eyes.

"Hikari." Taka murmured, and Miaka nodded, tears glittering in her eyes as she swallowed hard.

"The book." She whispered. "Taka, Hikari's gone into the… the book!"

Chapter 6

Chapter Five

There were clouds in the sky over the mountain top that morning, as Hou Jun made his slow, careful ascent, pausing at intervals to survey the magnitude that was one of Kounan's most distinctive blessed mountains. Behind him, skipping along as she gathered flowers, Meikyo was his constant shadow, and he cast her a rueful look out of his good eye as he reflected that, to this small child, the mountain full of bandits were nothing to be feared.

In fact, he mused, Meikyo had had very little to be afraid of in her short life. And, when she had begged to be allowed to accompany her father up the mountain that morning, Hou Jun had found it impossible to refuse her. It had meant walking the short two and a half miles, rather than using the swifter transport of his spiritual magic, since Aidou had made him promise not to spirit the children into his *kasa* until they were both older, but in the end, he hadn't minded her company. As a baby she had been fragile and delicate, but she had thriven in the flourishing Kounan atmosphere, growing stronger with each passing year until all fear for her life had been firmly at an end. She was, as he well knew, a ray of innocence in a land tainted by the blood of the past, and it was this he took comfort in most of all when he looked at his younger child.

Though he loved both his children, there was a part of him which had to admit honestly to himself that Meikyo was his darling.

"Papa, why are we going to see Uncle Wolf this morning?" At that moment the small girl skipped up to join him, slipping her hand into his as she gazed up at him quizzically. "We're not taking herbs — why are we going up the mountain? Are we going on a visit?"

"Sort of." Hou Jun hid a smile at his daughter's innocent nickname for the fiesty bandit leader. "I have to talk to him about something important, that's all. And you wanted to collect flowers, or I wouldn't have brought you with me, you know. The mountain can be a dangerous place, so stick close, all right? I don't want you falling into any holes."

"You say that every time we come." Meikyo giggled, squeezing his hand more tightly. "But I never do."

“True, but there’s always a first time.” Hou Jun bantered lightly. “And then who’s going to pull you out?”

“You an’ Uncle Wolf of course.” Meikyo said simply.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you an’ Uncle Wolf have to protect everybody. Your knee says so.” Meikyo said triumphantly. “So you’d have to help me. Cos it’s what Suzaku said.”

Hou Jun gazed at her for a moment, then he laughed, hoisting the small child — for despite her age she was still petite and light enough for him to lift — into his arms.

“You always have an answer.” He murmured. “Maybe you are more like me than I thought, you know. Just because you have your mother’s good looks doesn’t mean you can’t take after your father on the inside, after all.”

“I’m going to be just like you, when I grow up.” Meikyo told him firmly. “I’m going to get a red mark too and then I’m going to protect everyone.”

“Mei-chan, only Suzaku’s chosen have the red marks.” Hou Jun gently set her down, touching her on the nose. “And they only bear them when the Priestess of Suzaku has come to Kounan. Tasuki and I both have them still, because we remember the Miko and the time we had to fight for Kounan’s peace. But now Kounan is at peace, she won’t come again. And so noone will have to have red marks on them. At least, not for a long time to come. Probably beyond my life, and yours as well.”

“Really?” Meikyo looked disappointed, and Hou Jun nodded.

“Really.” He agreed softly. “But you can still help protect people, you know. You don’t have to be one of Suzaku’s chosen to be brave. Suzaku no Miko never had a red mark… but she was strong, and kind, and good to the people in Kounan. So you can still aspire to do that, Mei-chan. You’ll make me very proud, whatever you do — so long as in the end, you do what makes you happy.”

“I see.” Meikyo digested this. Then she nodded. “Then that’s what I’ll do, Papa. Because I want to be strong. Like you.”

“I think you already are, Mei-chan.” Hou Jun eyed her with some

amusement. “Stronger than you know.”

As they rounded the next corner, someone called out his name, and turning his head, Hou Jun realised that their approach had, as ever, been anticipated. Even as he raised his hand in a greeting, Meikyo let out a yell of delight, hurrying forwards to fling her arms around the man who, to many people in the local area, was both feared and admired for his strong command of the Reikaku-zan bandit brethren.

“Uncle Wolf! Uncle Wolf! We came to see you!” She exclaimed, even as the red-haired man gazed down at her in non-plussed silence. “Papa and I came on a visit… did you come to meet us?”

“Meikyo?” Genrou found his tongue at this point, disentangling himself carefully from the child’s embrace as he sent Hou Jun an accusatory look.

“Can you *please* drum into her head that hugging me like a maniac ain’t the best thing to do on the top of my mountain?” He demanded. “I do have to keep some respect up here, an’ bein’ randomly grabbed by eight year olds…”

He trailed off meaningfully, and Hou Jun laughed, nodding his head.

“She’s just excited to see you.” He said evenly. “It’s been a few months together since the last time you and I even spoke, Tasuki — and probably even longer since she saw you. She likes visiting the mountain — I can’t help that.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to come, actually. Or I was debatin’ goin’ down to the village.” Genrou admitted, gazing at the eager eyes of the small girl as he let out a sigh, ruffling her hair absently as he did so. “All right, brat, you win. I’m glad to see you too.”

“Yay, Uncle Wolf!” Meikyo dimpled. “Is Aunt Anzu here? Can I see her? I have flowers, and I want to give them to her.”

“She’s inside.” Genrou nodded, then, ‘Woah, girl!’ As Meikyo made to dart off in the direction of the entrance. “You don’t run off on the mountain, you idiot. You wanna fall in a hole?”

“Papa said that, but it’s okay. You’ll rescue me if I do.” Meikyo said, unphased. “Papa, can I take the flowers to Aunt Anzu? Please? I know the way, an’ I won’t go anywhere except straight there, I promise.”

Hou Jun sighed, meeting Tasuki’s gaze for a moment, and the Kashira sighed, spreading his hands.

“An eight year old comes up the damn mountain an’ she’s already

runnin' all over the shop." He said resignedly. "That brat is just like you, Chichiri. She's into everythin' and it's impossible to argue with her for long."

Hou Jun chuckled.

"Aidou says the same." He admitted. "That she's like me more than she is like her mother. I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse for the poor mite, but such is life."

He cast his daughter a smile, nodding his head.

"Straight to Anzu, and don't take any detours." He said softly. "Everyone here knows you, after all. But don't cause her bother, if she's busy, all right? Come back to me, if she is. Understood? I'll be with your Uncle, and you know where that is."

"Yes, Papa." Meikyo's eyes twinkled with excitement, and, clutching the blossoms tightly to her chest, she disappeared into the bandit hideout.

"To be honest, I didn't want to discuss this in front of her." Genrou admitted, once she was gone. "As you say, everyone on Reikaku-zan knows Meikyo is yours an' blood to me — so noone'd dare hurt her. But I didn't expect her to come too — if you've come because of… Suzaku."

At his companion's uncharacteristic seriousness, Hou Jun nodded his head.

"You've noticed it too, then." He murmured. "The something strange in the air?"

"Don't know about the air, but there's somethin' strange on my arm." Genrou said ruefully, holding out his bandaged right arm as proof. "I've had to bind it to keep the men from freakin' out an' thinking I'm about to take off on them again. But am I, Chichiri? Tell me what's goin' on, will you? Are we about to fight against somethin' all over again? Or what?"

"That's what's not clear." Hou Jun admitted. "My mark's been showing up more lately, too. But I've been trying to sense the others — even Miaka and Tamahome. No joy on any account. It's just you and I. I haven't left the village to go searching — Aidou's not keen on me taking off without due concern, but she knew I had to come up here. Plus, she knew if I brought Mei-chan with me, I'd be unlikely to head off on some impulsive journey. Not taking an eight year old girl for the ride — she knows me far too well after all this time."

“Yeah, no kiddin’.” Genrou eyed him in amusement. “All right. Come inside, huh? We can’t talk out here, an’ even if my chamber ain’t that much more private, at least it’s somethin’.”

Hou Jun inclined his head in agreement, following the red-haired bandit deep into the heart of Reikaku-zan. As he did so, he greeted one or two men who knew him, a rueful smile touching his lips as he reflected that, once upon a time, socialising with bandits would have been the last thing on his mind.

“We come from such different worlds, and yet, in so many ways, he’s the closest friend I have.” He mused, as Genrou unlocked the door of his own private quarters, ushering his companion inside. “It’s funny how life turns out, you know — but I’d like to think Suzaku’s satisfied… that Tasuki and I have both taken our chances at living our lives and that we’ve not wasted the time we’ve been given. It’s all precious — being one of the Shichi Seishi taught me that more than anything.”

“Well?” Now they were alone, Genrou shut the door, leaning up against it as he folded his arms across his chest. “So you usually have an answer for this kind of shit, Chichiri. Why are we suddenly gettin’ the marks showin’ up at random times? I don’t like how it feels… like somethin’s about to drop on us but I don’t know what.”

“I feel rather the same way, you know.” Hou Jun admitted. “But like I said, it isn’t clear to me either. I don’t think it’s Miaka or Tamahome… the last time Taka-kun showed up in this world, I sensed him right away. But this time I’ve felt nothing like that. There’s just been a strange feeling on the wind — of change, of uncertainty… of something from the East.”

“The East, huh?” Genrou eyed him sharply. “Kutou?”

“That’s probable, but I haven’t had a chance to go find out.” Hou Jun admitted. “It would mean riding to Eiyou, and seeing the Emperor. I wanted to speak to you first — actually, I wanted you to come with me, when I go. Eiyou’s not that far, especially if I use my *kasa* and we could do it in a day, you know — but if anyone would know if there was anything happening on our borders, it would be the palace.”

“The palace.” Genrou murmured, rubbing his chin. “I ain’t been there in years — not since we all summoned Suzaku the last time, with the help of that strange friend o’ Miaka’s. I guess he’s a grown man now, Boushin. It’s funny to think of — that Hotohori’s been dead that long. An’ all of them… brings it back, when you talk about that

rock headed brat as Emperor of Kounan."

"But he is, and he looks like following in his father's footsteps." Hou Jun's good eye twinkled. "You should come more often, Tasuki-kun. I know he'd welcome you — you were one of his father's comrades, after all."

"Nah." Genrou looked rueful. "True as it might be, ya know, I ain't really the kind of person who's welcome in a royal palace. Bandits an' princes don't really mix, an' though noone ever interferes with what we do here, I don't need to rock the boat any. Jus' because I was one of Hotohori-sama's buddies, it doesn't mean that I should spend all my time in royal company. Besides, I ain't sure how it'd go down with the men, either — if they thought I was in the imperial pocket."

"I suppose so." Hou Jun admitted. "I've tried to keep my promise to Hotohori-sama and I've travelled there at least once a year, more often if I can. Boushin — or no, I should call him Reizeitei-sama now — hardly needs me to check on him now, he's a man in his own right. But… it's become something of a habit, and I admit, I like seeing the leader he's become. Hotohori-sama would be proud, to see him… he's going to be just as good an Emperor."

"An' you think that he'll know somethin' that's goin' on? Somethin' in Kutou, if that's what is happening?" Genrou asked apprehensively. Hou Jun nodded his head.

"That's my feeling." He agreed. "That if there's some kind of political issue, he'll be able to tell us more. And if it means that Kutou are massing for some kind of attack on Kounan, Tasuki…"

"I know." Genrou groaned. "When Kounan calls, an' all that."

"Yeah." Hou Jun agreed. "But somehow… I'm not sure. Something feels different, this time. I don't think… well, I wasn't aware that Kutou was particularly stable internally since the war with us all those years ago, you know… I'm not sure they have the time to waste on invading other countries."

"Then why the characters all of a sudden? Surely that'd only happen if Kounan was in danger?" Genrou questioned. Hou Jun shrugged helplessly.

"*When the country is on the brink of collapse, the Miko will come from another world to gather the seven stars of Suzaku.*" He quoted with a sigh. "But there are only two stars of Suzaku, and no Miko. I don't know, Tasuki. I really don't know. I just… I don't think… that the Miko is coming. I mean, Miaka or that other girl — or any other

Priestess. Because if they did… if there was… I'd be picking up that kind of sense from the reborn spirits of the others. Now I've met them — now I know who they each are in their new lives, I'd be able to detect that in the ether — if they were about to be pulled back into the fray. But… I don't. So I'm as confused as you are."

"Then I suppose we'll do as you say, an' go see Hotohori's son." Genrou sighed, toying anxiously with his bound arm. "In Eiyou. An' see what he knows."

"I think that'd be best." Hou Jun agreed. "Tomorrow, when the sun rises, come to the village. The earlier we leave, the earlier we can get back, after all — and the sooner we'll know what's going on. I'll send a messenger tonight to the palace, to tell them that we're coming — I know that Houki's always said we don't have to have her permission to go there, but I think it would be polite, you know, to request an audience with the Emperor Reizeitei, even at short notice."

"All right." Genrou nodded his head. "Then that's what we'll do. I'll leave Kouji an' Anzu to mind this place — it won't hurt for a day or so, an' things have been peaceful on the Kaou-zan front — briefly. I guess it could be worse timin', considerin' that."

"Which is the key thing in all of this." Hou Jun admitted. "Kounan *is* at peace. Truly. Even your bandit rivalry isn't playing itself out on such a grand scale. For the first time since Suzaku's legend began to come true — there truly is calm in the southern lands."

"That's why I don't like the feelin'." Genrou said darkly. "Tomorrow, then. I'll be there… an' we'll go find out what's goin' on. If we can."

"If we can." Hou Jun echoed. "And if it's something we need to be involved in, then maybe we can start to do something about it."

"You summoned me, my Lord?"

As the fairskinned, silverhaired guardsman bowed before his Emperor's throne, Kintsusei gazed at him thoughtfully, a pensive look in his dark eyes as he considered Kikei's words. There was noone else present at that moment, for Kintsusei had sought a moment alone to speak with his most loyal servant.

"You know when we are alone, Hyoushin, there's no need for such formality." He said quietly. The soldier raised his head, meeting the Emperor's gaze with impassive violet eyes.

"You are Emperor of Kutou, Kintsusei-sama." He said softly. "It

would be disrespectful for me to enter here and not bow. It might create resentment against you, in such unstable times, if your advisors felt you showed me any undue favour."

"Even so, there are times I'd rather we were friends and comrades rather than ruler and subject." Kintsusei sighed, worry-lines creasing his brow as he remembered the recent attempt on his life. "Sometimes I feel like I can't have friends, now I've been forced into this position."

Hyoushin did not reply, but Kintsusei saw a flicker of something cross his gaze, and he smiled.

"I know. It puts you in an awkward position, too… I'm sorry for that." He admitted. "Even so…"

"You have done nothing to trouble me, Kintsusei-sama." Hyoushin spoke evenly. "On the contrary, I owe to you my life and my current position. You have nothing to apologise to me for. In fact, it is I who should be doing so to you — for being remiss enough in my duties to allow a man close enough to you to threaten your life."

Kintsusei paused, then slowly he got up from his throne, making his way down the steps towards his companion.

"I am a good enough soldier to defend my own life." He said simply. "The danger has passed. I trust you found no other threats in the offing?"

"I believe that he acted alone." Hyoushin agreed. "I have done as you instructed me, but I have not uncovered any sign of a greater plot at work. I think he acted on impulse… that he sought to take you off guard, as a reaction to what had happened in the villages."

"Yes." Kintsusei looked troubled. "That. For which I must take some responsibility, I suppose."

"I think not, my Lord." Hyoushin raised his cool gaze to his companion. "You did not order the burning of those houses. That was done by those who disdain your position, not your loyal soldiers."

"I know, but…"

Kintsusei faltered, and a faint smile touched Hyoushin's lips.

"My family and my people were killed and enslaved by men of your father's regime." He said softly. "Yet I do not hold you responsible for the acts of your ancestors. Kutou is not yet a secure land… but this is not your doing. You have spent the past eighteen years attempting to bring peace to the Eastern lands."

Kintsusei eyed him for a moment. Then he returned the smile.

“If there’s one thing I have never regretted, Hyoushin, it was saving your life.” He admitted. “You’d be well within your rights to hate me and mine, because of what you and your family went through, but you’ve always been a true friend to me — a supporter that I have ultimate faith in. Of all things, I am glad I saved you.”

Hyoushin’s lips twitched into another smile, a flicker of irony in his violet gaze.

“I have no reason to hate you.” He said calmly. “I don’t lay myself open to such things. Being loyal is easy. You are a good man, and I have sworn to you my life. I am Meihi — I would never break my bond except with my death. And to focus on such negative events is a weakness. Life is as it is. Thanks to you, Kintsusei-sama, I have it to live. For that and that alone, you will always be able to put faith in my actions. As long as I have breath in my body, I will not betray you.”

“I know.” Kintsusei nodded. “I wish I had more Meihi around me to put my faith in — I’ve begun to think that the men of the clans and tribes have a better sense of honour than the native Kutou people.”

He grimaced.

“I wish the Shougun was still here.” He admitted. “That he’d not gone to Yui-sama’s strange world, and been slain in battle against Suzaku. Of all people, he’d be able to be decisive — he might have been the one person who could have put this country back together. But he never had the chance to finish what he began. And so, the divisions remain. There’s so much pain among my people, Hyoushin.”

“Pain is a part of life.” Hyoushin said quietly, spreading his hands. “It is not the pain that makes them weak and divided. It is the fear of that pain. The inability to move on, because they are not able to overcome the difficulties that stand in their way. To let go of the past — to discard and detach it as if it were never there — that is the only way they will learn to live in peace. As I have done, they must forget what has been. Kutou cannot have a future so long as it lives in the past.”

“Wise words, as always.” Kintsusei admitted. “But unfortunately not everyone is as equinanimous as you are.”

“I would call it simply common sense.” Hyoushin shrugged. “No man can survive while doubt eats away at his heart.”

“Speaking of such things, I have something I want you to do.”

Kintsusei pursed his lips. “It’s actually Kikei’s idea, but when I came to consider it, I think… maybe he’s right. That his way of thinking is something I can utilise to try and heal Kutou’s deep wounds.”

“Kikei?” A faint glitter of dislike surfaced in the fairskinned man’s amethyst eyes, and Kintsusei nodded.

“Yes. The Priest who serves the Shrine of Seiryuu.”

“I know the man, my Lord.”

“You have reservations?”

“I would not contradict my Lord’s decisions.”

“Hyoushin, speak frankly to me. We are alone… tell me your fears.”

“I have no fears, Kintsusei-sama. I do not believe in such things.”

“But you don’t like the idea of me following Kikei’s advice?”

“I have no opinion either way.” Hyoushin said evenly. “He is a man you trust, and that is all that matters to me.”

Kintsusei frowned for a moment, then he sighed.

“Sometimes I wish you’d be more direct and less diplomatic.” He admitted. “Are you suggesting that Kikei is plotting against me? Is that what you’re trying to convey?”

“I have no evidence to believe such a thing, Kintsusei-sama — and without evidence, I would not seek to take action or pass judgement.” Hyoushin met his companion’s gaze impassively. “Kikei is a man of Seiryuu. I am not. There it ends.”

“Ah…” Kintsusei’s expression cleared, and he nodded. “Yes. The Azure Dragon of the East… you never have been fully persuaded to my faith, have you?”

“I am a Meihi, my Lord.” Hyoushin said evenly.

“But you and I know that Kikei is a Hin, even though he does not make it plainly known to the court as a whole. He is of the same clan as the Shougun, and both served Seiryuu.” Kintsusei reminded him. “And it is an errand of Seiryuu’s that I want you to undertake — if you will.”

“Of course.” Hyoushin nodded his head. “If you think it’s important, I will do what you command.”

“Do you remember the cave in which we first exchanged words?” Kintsusei asked softly. “The underground caverns where the lakes lie?”

A flash of recognition and shock flooded Hyoushin's expression for a moment, animating it for the briefest of instants. Then, as soon as it had come, the look was gone, and he nodded his head.

"I do, my Lord." He agreed levelly. "You wish me to go there?"

"Yes, because you're the only one I can trust to do it and report back to me without taking the artefact for yourself." Kintsusei admitted.

"Artefact, my Lord?"

"Kikei believes — and so do I, having read the ancient scribings — that concealed in that cave is a relic of Seiryuu — a scale sealed in a shrine which contains a powerful mage spirit called 'Suiko.' It's said to be a guardian of Kutou, and although Kikei thinks its power is greatly reduced from the actions of Tenkou, he believes that we might be able to use what's left in our pursuit of peace." Kintsusei explained. "If we can locate that and Yui-sama's Shinzahou, then we might be able to find a way to raise Seiryuu. Or… or more than that — to unite the lands in the way the Shougun always wanted us to do. If we could harness the power of the Beast Gods… but I'm getting ahead of myself. First we need to ascertain that this scale exists, and is where Kikei believes it to be. Will you go on this errand for me, Hyoushin? Even though you have no faith in Seiryuu — will you search out his holy relic?"

Hyoushin smiled ironically.

"I am perhaps better suited to go than anyone, given that fact." He admitted. "If I do not believe in Seiryuu's overall power, I can have no personal reason to obtain his relic. I will go, my Lord, and if the scale is there, I will find it."

"Take some men with you — don't go there alone." Kintsusei advised. "It might be arduous, if not dangerous — and I realise, that place probably brings back memories. It is, after all, deep beneath the lands where you used to… work."

"I have discarded that past." Hyoushin said flatly. "But I will take two men with me, to help me search. You can have faith in my success, Kintsusei-sama."

"Then let me show you what Kikei showed me, about the precise location." Kintsusei said frankly, and Hyoushin inclined his head slightly, allowing his companion to lead him from the main imperial chamber to the smaller study that had become his working room. His position as Emperor had been so precarious for so long that many of

the trimmings of royalty had been ignored in favour of better protection, and so the chamber was simply furnished — and now, entirely clear of blood. As Kintsusei cast his gaze around it, he realised that there was no trace of the traitor's attempt on his life — that such things only now existed within his own memory.

He gestured to the desk, and Hyoushin stepped forwards, unrolling the scroll that lay there and skimming his gaze over the drawing.

"I see." He murmured. "Then I understand why it is you want me to go, my Lord. As you say, I have been there before."

"Yes." Kintsusei nodded, and Hyoushin raised his gaze.

"I will go at once, with your permission." He said briefly. "I will take Aoiketsu and Maichu with me, and we will find the relic you seek. They are young men, and Aoiketsu is a fool anywhere near the heat of battle. But he is observant and careful in his movements and Maichu is one eager to gain the Emperor's favour through his hard work and dedication. I believe they are the best choice. Particularly Aoiketsu — considering the nature of the errand. It may prove useful, as it is *Seiryuu's* work you wish us to do."

"Aoiketsu." Kintsusei frowned, then, "He still persists in this unnatural squeamishness?"

"Yes, Lord." Hyoushin admitted. "He is one of the finest swordsmen of his age group, and he is quick, nimble and lithe. He shows signs of making a fine archer, also, for his aim is often true. He is a soldier with some intelligence and perception — not merely a fighting man. However, when it comes to the actual spilling of blood…"

He sighed, and for an instant, irritation flickered across his expression.

"He will never make it to the field of battle in his current mindset." He added. "So I must at least make use of him in whatever capacity I can."

"To think that one born of that blood would have such inherent weakness." Kintsusei looked pensive. "With his family's history in combat…"

"Yes, my Lord. It is a great shame, and I am doing all I can to work it out of him." Hyoushin inclined his head.

"Perhaps it's time we made him aware of everything, Hyoushin."

"He asks, from time to time, but I have never answered, Kintsusei-sama." Hyoushin said evenly. "I believe it is better that he does not

delve into such things. The past is gone. It has no relevance to the present. He is Kaiga Aoiketsu… that is the only name which matters to him and the only thing he should seek to live up to. To add the shadows of his ancestry would only add further pressure — he is still young in some respects. And I have not given up on him completely."

"If that is your counsel, I will follow your advice." Kintsusei said heavily. "You have had more to do with the boy since his mother's death, it's true — you are in a better position to judge his nature."

"Well, he otherwise shows great potential — and he is loyal to your Highness where others are less easy to gauge." Hyoushin said frankly. "In all other things I have no reason to criticise him or his efforts in any field. It may yet be simply the weakness of a young man — perhaps we have protected him too much — but in this task of yours, there should be no cause for concern. This is an errand he will be able to carry out without a problem — of that I am certain."

"You have been patient with him, Hyoushin. I appreciate it."

A faint smile flickered across Hyoushin's face, and he bowed his head in acknowledgement of his companion's words.

"I do not believe he is a lost cause yet, my Lord." He said evenly. "And I will continue to work with him so long as I feel that is the case. I realise you have a special interest in his progress — and I have no objection to training him. As I said, it may yet be the weakness of one so young — Aoiketsu is barely eighteen summers. If I may, my people tended to believe that youth still dictates the will and the mind before the man is fully a man among men. Much can be learnt as time goes on, and this will give him a chance to prove himself."

He shrugged.

"I believe loyal men more important than anything at present." He continued. "And in that regard, I have no doubts about Aoiketsu's mind."

"Then go, and take both him and Maichu to the caves." Kintsusei nodded. "Perhaps they will prove to be helpful to one another — if Maichu is still the impetuous, over-confident hot-head he was when he first came to join the military guard, he may benefit from some of Aoiketsu's caution."

"I believe so." Hyoushin agreed. "In the end, perhaps they will improve one another."

He bowed his head.

“I will go and speak to them directly.” He added. “And we will leave at once. You may have faith in one thing, Kintsusei-sama. If the scale of Seiryuu is indeed in those caves, then we will find it without fail.”

Everything was silent.

As Hikari opened her eyes, she felt the hot, dry sensation of parched earth beneath her fingers and as she struggled into a sitting position, she let out a sharp gasp of breath, staring with disbelief at her surroundings.

Far from the cold, dark chamber at the top of the Library, she was now in open country, and as she became more and more alert to her surroundings, she realised that the desert land seemed to stretch for miles around her. The peaks of mountains loomed in the distance, barren and dead as the earth on which she now sat, and as she got clumsily to her feet, she rubbed her eyes, not quite sure how to interpret what she was seeing.

“Did I… fall asleep?” She whispered, taking a tentative step forward. “There was a red light… that book… the pages all black… was that all just some kind of weird dream? Is that what this is… some kind of nightmare?”

She gazed around her, struck by the eerie stillness of this world, and as she glanced up, she realised that despite the blueness of the sky, it was a brassy, unnatural blue, as if not quite all it seemed. The sun glowed and glittered but there was a coldness about it and despite the heat of the atmosphere, Hikari stifled a shiver, unease creeping up her spine. As it did so, she realised what it was that disturbed her so much about her new location — that even in the sky above her head, there were no birds or insects.

There was no life.

Frowning, Hikari stumbled forwards, scouring the landscape for any brief sign that something lived in this arid wasteland, but as she walked, all she saw were the burnt out, dried out remains of trees dotted around the horizon. Some had the appearance of having been struck by lightning, others that they had just withered and died where they stood, as though all sense of existance had been sucked out of them from the ground beneath her feet. The further she walked, the more unnerved she became. Even if it was a dream, there was something about this place that frightened her.

“I need to wake up.” She muttered, clenching her fists. “This is just

because I fought with Mum and Dad — I always have bad dreams when I fight with someone. That's all this is — a stupid, stupid dream. Wake up, Hikari. Wake up!"

She pinched her arm firmly, digging her nails deep into her skin, but although her grip was almost enough to draw blood, her surroundings did not change. She winced, rubbing her sore arm as she bit her lip.

"Why can't I wake up?" She whispered. "What is this place? The red bird — everything — did I dream all of that? Nothing is making any sense… why can't I even understand the place I've been sent to in my damn dreams!?"

At that moment she reached the edge of what had clearly once been a settlement, for the cornerstones of houses still remained, though none of the buildings were entirely complete and a quick glance around told Hikari that like the land beyond, it was abandoned. Something about the ghost-town struck new fear into her troubled heart, and yet she could not turn back, as a sense of horrified fascination drew her forwards. Beneath the shade of the cruelly peaked mountain, she suddenly had the impression that some giant hunting beast had devoured all life in this place, and for an instant she remembered the ghostly figure of the red bird arcing over the roof of the National Library.

She shook her head to clear it, as she reached what had once been the centre of the village. Here, there was one house less battered and wartorn than the others, on account of its stronger foundations, and she gathered her courage, pushing back the door as she stepped inside.

It was like nothing she had ever seen before inside, and though it had clearly been abandoned, she was struck for a moment by the quaint simplicity of this ancient dwelling. Against the wall, in a huddle of torn, faded cloth was what appeared to be a patterned cloak and as she touched it, she suddenly had a sense of something stronger about it — that once it had been more than just fabric. Unnerved, she loosed her grip, turning her attention to the rooms beyond as she searched for any clue to where she was and what she had stumbled into.

As she left the main chamber, however, she stopped dead, fear piercing her heart as she registered what was up ahead. In the small room, obviously once a bedroom, two figures lay sleeping in low-lying, simple beds. But it was not that which had caught Hikari's attention, or had struck horror into her heart. Though they lay as if

asleep, it was clear they had been there for some time, for both of the small figures had been ravaged by time and the elements and neither were any more than bones against the fabric. Revulsion engulfed Hikari's body and she fought against the impulse to be sick as she realised they were the remains of children — children who had lain down to sleep, but never gotten up again.

"What *is* this place?" She whispered, backing out of the room as she tripped over something sticking out from another doorway. As she turned, she let out a shriek of dismay, realising that it had been the leg of another human being — this time an adult — robed in enough ragged fabric to give away the fact it had once been a woman, although like the children it had long since lost any pretence of human identity. Now terrified, Hikari turned on her heel, bolting from the premises and out into the street beyond as she struggled to get her breath.

A dream or not, she was frightened.

"Something killed them. Something here." She whispered. "Something terrible. They've been here for a long time, abandoned… but this whole place is… is abandoned. Nobody… nothing… no plants, no birds, no people. Just… death. Everywhere is… death."

She swallowed hard, feeling nauseous again as panic overwhelmed her.

"I don't like this. I don't want to dream this!" She exclaimed, her voice echoing in the silent stillness of the mountain valley. "I want to wake up. *I want to wake up*!"

As her hysteria rose, she felt something else burn up inside of her and as she closed her eyes, she felt the same strange hot light engulf her, as if drawing her back down into darkness. She did not fight it, and as the flare grew brighter and brighter, she found herself once more losing her grip on consciousness, tumbling deep into the black.

Chapter 7

Chapter Six

Another bright, warm day in Kounan.

The tall, elegant young man raised himself from his seat, moving out of the chamber onto the promenade beyond as he gazed approvingly up at the sky over his head, taking in the faint wisps of white cloud that dotted haphazardly across the sea of blue. It was a good day, he decided, for a meeting with old friends, and as he contemplated the message that had arrived late the previous night, a flicker of anticipation stirred in his goldish eyes. Although he had long since learnt that wild displays of excitement were not proper for one in his position, he could not help but smile.

“My Lord! My Lord, the Suzaku warriors are here!”

As if reading his thoughts, the voice of one of his close advisors startled him and he turned, nodding his head as he acknowledged the man’s words.

“Very well. Then bring them to me here.” He said softly. “It is too nice a day not to appreciate the weather, after all — and I need no ceremony to speak to such old dear friends.”

He frowned.

“But you said warriors? Is it then true? Tasuki-sama has accompanied Chichiri-sama to the palace this time?”

“Yes, my Lord, on a matter of some importance.”

“Then this is a great day indeed.” The young man’s smile widened, and he nodded. “Do as I ask, and bring them here. I will speak to them immediately — anything else can wait.”

“Yes, Heika.” The man bowed his head, then withdrew, and the young Emperor waited impatiently for his guests to emerge, concealing his excitement beneath his well-practiced dignity.

At length the doors slid back to reveal the two men he had awaited, and as his gaze flickered between the two, his gravity disappeared in an instant. He hurried forward, holding out his hands in welcome as both bowed their heads towards him.

“Chichiri — Tasuki! When I received the message… I didn’t expect to see you both. But I am glad to receive you — you are always welcome at the Palace.”

“*Boushin*?” Tasuki blinked, then smiled, shaking his head. “Shit, you *are* like your father. For a moment there…”

“It’s uncanny, you know.” Chichiri agreed, grasping the young man’s hands warmly. “Although you have to remember he’s Reizeitei-sama now, Tasuki-kun. He’s the Emperor of Kounan — not just Hotohori-sama’s son.”

“You don’t need to be so formal with me. Sometimes I’d rather you weren’t.” The young Emperor admitted. “But I am glad to see you. Now I’m an adult and Emperor in my own right, so many people treat me with such distant deference — it’s pleasant to have company who see me as a human being, and not just as ruler of Kounan. My father left me this burden and I carry it with pride — but I am still young enough to miss the idea of close friendship.”

“I’m not sure you ever outgrow that.” Chichiri admitted. “But we came for a reason other than just pleasure, I’m afraid. At least, I think we did… if you’ll forgive us.”

“I see.” Boushin’s handsome features clouded, and he nodded. “Then I imagine you’ve come because of the disturbing news from the Eastern border… I did wonder, when I got the message, if that was what it was.”

“Eastern border?” Tasuki frowned. “So those Kutou bastards *are* at the bottom of this. I might have known.”

“Kutou is a troubled, war-ravaged nation, even now.” Boushin agreed. “Since the war my father lost his life in, there has never been stability there like there has here. Both my father and the Emperor of Kutou died in the conflict, and yet, whilst Kounan has endured and recovered… the same cannot be said for our neighbours to the East. They are still wracked by treachery and civil conflict… and I believe that the situation may be growing increasingly worse. The Emperor of Kutou — such as he is — is in such a precarious position that he cannot even count on his own advisors — and two envoys I have sent there have been killed in skirmishes or uprisings.”

“Or murdered because they were from Kounan?” Chichiri suggested softly. Boushin shook his head.

“I do not believe so.” He reflected. “I don’t think that Kutou is at war with Kounan, or even could sustain a conflict with such a stable

power as we are now. They are too busy fighting one another… but I will admit that those living on the Eastern border have demanded greater military presence of late. I have done what I can, but I do not want to give Kutou the impression we are massing to invade. I do not seek another war for Kounan, now or ever."

Tasuki faltered, then slid back his sleeve, unwinding the white bandaging as he revealed his glittering red character.

"Somethin' tells me it ain't a matter of choice." He said bluntly, and Boushin's clever eyes widened. He glanced at Chichiri, who nodded.

"Mine also, without my direct control, you know." He confirmed, answering the unspoken question in the Emperor's gaze. "But it isn't like previous times. I have no sense of the others — only Tasuki and I. I don't think Kounan is about to have a third Priestess."

"And yet it is concerning." Boushin's brow furrowed in thought, unconsciously adopting an expression worn all too often by his late father when considering the state of his nation. "That Suzaku's spirit should stir within you like this, at a time when the land seems to be at peace. Now I do understand the reason for your sudden coming here. My advisors have told me to beware the lull before a storm — that when my Father was Emperor, he reigned over a peaceful Kounan to begin with — that the war with Kutou was almost unexpected, and sudden — almost forced into play by the actions of their Shougun, Nakago."

A flicker of hate touched his golden eyes as he contemplated the name of the man who had stolen his father's life, and for a moment there was silence. Then he stirred himself, spreading his hands.

"I don't know much more than you, but I will increase the surveillance on the Eastern border and do my best to find out what's happening in our neighbouring land." He said at length. "That's all I can do, as Emperor of Kounan… to protect the people and the land in the way my Father intended me to do."

"He would be proud of you, Boushin-kun." Chichiri said softly, and Boushin started at the familiar, affectionate name, offering the Seishi a smile. He nodded his head.

"I hope so." He murmured. "I know he and the others were reborn — that his spirit lives a new life now. But I do think, sometimes, that an element of Saihitei-sama still lives around this palace. That when things are difficult, both Mother and I draw strength from the things he left behind. As if he is still watching, somehow… that even now, he's taking care of Kounan from afar."

Chichiri's expression broke into a smile, and he nodded his head.

"Indeed he is." He agreed gently. "Through you. His blood runs through your veins — so long as you are here, Hotohori-sama will never leave the palace."

Boushin's eyes widened, and a sense of warmth settled in his young heart as he nodded his head again.

"So it is." He agreed evenly. "And I do my best, Chichiri-san, to live up to the man he was. To be the Emperor he was… to be strong and not have fear. I have Mother — I would be lost without her support and gentleness behind me. But I am a man now, and I must be a true ruler in my own name. I must… and I try."

"Kounan has nothing to complain about." Chichiri's ruby eye twinkled. "When my own daughter can run riot around the mountainside without fear of any danger, then I realise most of all how gentle this country has become. Have faith, Heika. Your land flourishes under your rule. So long as that is the case, there will be no more Priestesses… there will be no need to raise Suzaku or repeat the legend."

"But even considering that, you and Tasuki…" Boushin hesitated, then he made up his mind, nodding resolutely as once more he appeared the image of his father.

"For now, there is nothing to do except watch, wait and listen for word." He said evenly. "But I will ask of you both this. You are trusted of Kounan, dear friends to my family and ones in whom I have ultimate faith. Your coming here does not need to be heralded — nor do you need to address me with the formality that others do. I would rather… I would rather that, if you learnt anything through your divine connections, you came to me at once. I must be aware of everything that happens in Kounan. If I am to be a truly great Emperor, I must know everything."

"Right now we ain't got anythin' helpful to tell you." Tasuki grimaced. "But you think somethin' is coming too, Bou… Reizeitei-sama?"

"All I know is that, where the legend of Suzaku is concerned, my family have intimate knowledge and understanding of its blessings and its curses." Boushin said soberly. "And in light of this, I would rather be prepared. Prevented war — prevented bloodshed — is better than victory in battle. I share the scars of the last war as much as anyone — for that reason, I never properly met my father in his lifetime. If not for war, he would have remained Emperor of Kounan,

and I might have had someone from whom to learn the things I have yet to understand."

He cast Chichiri a fleeting smile.

"At least I have had you, when I have needed advice." He added, gratitude stirring in his golden eyes. "I know you have paid such attention to my mother and I because it was Father's wish, but I have always appreciated your presence. To at least know all I can from you about him — from you and my mother both — I can hope to emulate him even a little."

Chichiri inclined his head.

"My pleasure, you know." He said lightly. "Sharing those memories brings me pleasure too… both Tasuki and I miss the other Seishi even now — and to share the adventures we had with someone else helps to keep them alive in our hearts too."

"Tasuki-san, you know, you are always welcome at the palace too. You too are in my trust." Boushin's gaze rested on the bandit, and Tasuki looked rueful.

"So much as a mountain bandit ever is." He said wryly.

"I know nothing of mountain banditry." Boushin said innocently, a smile touching his lips. "Reikaku-zan is… beyond my line of sight."

"Yeah, I know, an' I appreciate that." Tasuki nodded. "But too much comin' here… the men might get twitchy about it. An' it ain't good for you as Emperor, either."

"On the contrary, the Reikaku-zan bandits fought bravely against Kutou's army for my father." Boushin said levelly. "Several died, others were honoured for their courage. It is a matter of respecting those who served my predecessor in the way they merit, that's all."

For a moment his eyes twinkled, giving both Chichiri and Tasuki a brief insight into Boushin's true character beyond the sober, impressive imperial front he had learnt to cultivate. In that instant he did not resemble Hotohori, but rather his own person, his mother's features reflected equally in his face. Then it was gone, and he was once more the Emperor.

"My advisors are starting to talk to me about the subject of an Empress." He added. "In the same way as I believe they hounded my father. I am now of the age he was when he married my mother, and when he died against Kutou. I do not wish to be in the position he was — having to put his life between a woman he loved and a country he

was sworn to protect. I wish to bring the two together… and for that reason, I wish to keep Kounan peaceful. I would like to see sons of mine grow up, in a way my father could not… and for this I rely on you as much as he did, I'm afraid. If you learn anything I should know, return to Eiyou and report to me. We will not disturb the people of this land with another war. I have promised myself this — that there will be no war or suffering in Kounan whilst I am Emperor."

"We'll do our best." Chichiri agreed. "I've been opening my senses of late, trying to pick up anything and if I do, I'll be here as soon as I can be. I'm of the same thinking as you, Heika — I don't want to see another war, either. The last one is still vivid enough in my memory to want to prevent it from ever happening again."

"Amen to that." Tasuki said fervently. "But if it comes… dammit, we'll fight."

Boushin's expression broke into a smile, and he nodded his head.

"I know." He said softly. "I have great faith in Suzaku's Celestial Warriors. So long as you are here, I'm certain that Kounan will remain safe, no matter what troubles Kutou undergo."

The underground caves.

Hyoushin paused at the entrance to the subterranean chamber, a vague flicker of something in his violet eyes as he cast his gaze around at his surroundings. Beneath the war-torn surface of Kutou, such a place of tranquil beauty seemed almost unheard of, and yet, with the gentle lapping of the water against the stone, he knew that legend called it Seiryuu's pathway into the world — the connecting passage between his divine resting place and the men of the earth above.

Surely, then, Kikei's theories were correct. Surely this was the cave which guarded the Shrine of the Scale somewhere in its depths.

He took a few steps forward, hesitating as he caught sight of something glinting in the darkness. Frowning, he bent to pick it up, turning it over in his hand as his eyes widened. It had aged some, and rusted at the tip, but it was clearly recogniseable as an arrowhead, of the type that many common Kutou archers still used on the field of battle. As he gazed at it, running his finger over it's uneven surface, flickers of memory began to stir inside of him and, as if from the darkness, a voice seemed to speak to him, drawing him back to the past.

"Will you follow me?"

The soldier gave a tug at his arm, and with a start, the pale-skinned, silver haired young man found himself pulled into a series of caves and passages, each so alike that he was disorientated and confused by the track that they followed. Down and down they went, towards what the wounded man thought must be the centre of the world itself, until he could hear the sound of running water. As they stepped into a chamber, his eyes widened, absorbing the glittering pools that surrounded them, their strange, ethereal beauty quite alien to his eyes.

His companion paused, offering him a smile.

"We're safe here. I promise." He said softly. "Your arm — will you let me see it?"

The fairskinned man blinked, then, wordlessly, held out his arm as the boy — yes, he was only a boy, that was clear now — worked to strip away the blooded fabric to reveal the wound beneath. The arrow had pierced deep into his flesh, and he winced, biting his lip against the pain as his companion worked to carefully draw the arrow-head free of the wound.

"I'm sorry." He said unecessarily. "I know it hurts, but if you leave it there, you'll get infected and probably you'll die."

At this, the fairskinned man stared at him, not comprehending, and his companion nodded.

"It's all right. I'll help you." He promised. "You're not my enemy, and you're hurt, so relax. I'm not going to kill you."

For a moment there was silence, punctuated only by the sharp intakes of breath or gasps of pain as the young boy methodically worked the arrowhead loose. At length he was successful, dropping it down on the ground, and offering his companion a grin.

"There. It's out." He said frankly. "Will you let me wash it clean? Then I'll bind it up and… and then it'll be all right."

The fairskinned man eyed his companion in disbelief.

"Why… you helping me?" At last he found words in the native Kutou tongue, spoken as they were with a thick, lilting tribal accent, and at them, the boy started, then smiled.

"So you do speak." He observed. "And our language, too. I wasn't sure. You're a Meihi, aren't you? I've heard stories about your people. That bastard made you a slave — but it's all right. The Shougun will take care of him — that's why we came, to bring him his share of imperial karma. But you're not one of his men — not by choice, are you? Your cheek is tattooed — I know you weren't in this place by your own will."

The fairskinned man's hand went briefly to his cheek, running his fingers slowly over the brand that marked him out as the Lord's property. He nodded.

"I am." He agreed softly. "But why should that… nobody likes Meihi. We… are… slaves. That is all we are for. So says my master… so he has always said."

"Well, your master is an asshole." The youngster said frankly, loosening his armour and tearing a strip from his own shirt beneath as he dipped it in the cool water. He pressed it firmly against his companion's jagged, deep injury and as he did so, the wounded man felt a faint prickle touch his skin, as if some divine power was at work. "Plus, if he's not been executed by now, I'll be very much surprised. Shougun is a Hin, you know. He doesn't believe in enslaving Kutou's tribesmen. Your master will get what he deserves. Trust me. And the Emperor too. They'll all get what's coming to them, for the things that they've done."

There was a note of bitterness in his tones, and the fairskinned man wondered at it. Hate enough against his sovereign that he would seek to help an injured slave even in the thick of battle?

"What is your name?" The boy asked him now, and his companion started, his violet eyes clouding as he digested the question.

"I have no name." He said flatly, in his clipped, broken language as he struggled to speak the master's hated tongue with enough clarity to be understood. "Since day I became slave, I have no name."

"But you must have one." The boy reasoned. "My name is Kintsusei… can you remember, what you were called before you became a slave?"

The fairskinned man frowned, as unpleasant memories flickered across his senses. Tears glittered in his eyes, but he forced them back, hardening his heart against them as he shook his head.

"Do not remember." He said softly, fighting to keep his composure. "I am… slave. Nothing else. Just… slave."

"Not any more, you're not." Kintsusei sat back, admiring his handiwork. "Not if your master's been butchered and his land set ablaze."

The simplicity with which the youngster spoke such horrifying words struck the tribesman and he gazed at his companion anew.

"Without master, slave's life is death." He said flatly. "We are all… dead now."

"That's silly." Kintsusei snorted. "Don't you care at all what happens to you? I helped you because I thought you needed it. I've read stories about

the Meihi. I know that they were a peaceful tribe, and that they were attacked and killed by my people without provocation. So I wanted to… to give something back. To… try and make amends."

He bit his lip, and the fairskinned man saw reticence and guilt in the boy's dark eyes. In that instant, he appeared older than he was, and the former slave had the impression that he, too, had suffered already in his short life.

"I am born of the Imperial family. Distantly, but enough to give me shame for it." He admitted now. "I am a blood descendant of the evil men who allowed so much hurt to be inflicted on your people, and so, in that sense, I ***am*** *your enemy. But I don't want to be. And… I thought… if I could help you… if I could help even one of you, then maybe… maybe the blood debt isn't so heavy on my head."*

The Meihi's eyes widened in disbelief, and Kintsusei shrugged.

"I know it's silly. It can't make amends for all the years of persecution and pain." He admitted. "But I… I can't do anything else. I just… when we came here, and you were injured… I wanted to help you. That's all. And I still do… if you'll let me."

"There's someone else down here!" The sound of voices alerted them both to the fact they had been discovered, and instinctively Kintsusei tensed, reaching for his discarded sword as he prepared for some kind of attack. As two soldiers broke through into the cave beneath, the tribesman realised they were his master's retainers, and a cold surge of anger coupled with fear rushed through him as he struggled to his feet. Pain shot through his injured arm, and he clutched at it, struggling not to cry out as the men advanced.

"Stay back from me, else I'll kill you both!" Kintsusei had no such reservations about facing the men, for, blade drawn, he had darted in front of his companion, determination on his face.

"You are an enemy. He is nothing more than a slave. You are the ones who will be killed, and your bodies strung up as traitors to Kutou." One of the soldiers hissed, and the tribesman took a step back, remembering that one of them had been responsible for whipping both him and a fellow slave only the previous day. The other boy — no older than his would-be defender — had died of the resultant injuries, and despite himself, fear began to paralyse the pale man's scarred heart.

But not so Kintsusei

"I act in Nakago's name. Nakago, the Shougun of Kutou!" He exclaimed. "You are the traitors and you won't hurt either of us!"

What happened next seemed almost unreal, passing in a blur and the wounded tribesman watched in disbelief as the boy who moments earlier had tended so kindly to his injured arm became entirely the soldier, determination and conviction on his face as he battled against the two men. Both were older and more experienced, yet somewhere in the depths of his mind, the fairskinned man realised that Kintsusei was fighting not just for Nakago, but to keep his own word about his blood debt. He was fighting to protect both of them, and this acknowledgement of his own self as a human entity shocked the slave into action. As one of the men was disarmed, he reached across for the blade with his left hand, glancing at it as he observed his companion neatly dispatching the man with a sweep of his weapon. As the other man came at the boy from behind, the slave took advantage of his ignored status, his hand tightening on the weapon as he lunged forward without hesitation, driving the silver steel deep into the back of the man who had so cruelly whipped him.

"You will die." He hissed in his native tongue, a cold, sinister anger flaring in his violet eyes as the man stumbled and choked, clutching at his middle as the sword ran him right through. "I will show you… I am not just another slave!"

Kintsusei's blade swung across once more, dashing through the soldier's jugular and as he fell to the floor, the tribesman stepped forward, eying his bleeding body with a cold, distant look in his eye. He bent to retrieve the sword from the man's body, and then, with a swift, decisive action, he severed the soldier's head, grabbing it up in his hands as he gazed upon the soulless, empty eyes of one he had once been so afraid of.

Now there was nothing to fear. In the end, he had just been a man. A man who had died, on the end of a blade wielded by a slave.

Kintsusei stared at him uncertainly, and at the gaze, the tribesman released his grip on the head, allowing it to fall to the floor without even casting it a second glance. He paused, then bowed his head towards his young rescuer.

"You… what…" Kintsusei faltered, then he stepped forward, offering him a smile.

"Thank you." He said softly. "You might make a good soldier yourself, you know — one day."

"Soldier?" The tribesman started, then he shook his head. "I am slave. What life does slave have, with this on cheek?"

He brushed his face angrily, and Kintsusei shrugged, sheathing his blade as he did so.

"You're not a slave any more. I told you. Your master and all of the ones who hurt you will be dead by nightfall." He said candidly. "You're free now. Is there nothing you want to do, to be, to experience? Your arm will heal, I think, now that the arrow-head is out. But you don't have to worry about being a slave any more. The Shougun is a Hin, I told you. He wouldn't believe in it — in forcing you to go back to that life, when you've been liberated by our men. Kutou is changing — completely changing — and in the new Kutou, you will be able to be free. I promise you this… you will."

The fairskinned man stared, digesting this slowly. Then, a faint flicker of a smile touched his lips. He held out the blooded blade to his young companion, who took it in confusion, and then he bowed his head again, this time with more reverence.

"To you I owe my life. So to you I give my life." He said softly. "Such is Meihi way."

"I told you, you're noone's slave, not now!" Kintsusei protested, but his companion shook his head.

"It is Meihi way." He repeated. "You fought for my life. I must repay."

"Considering the blood debt my family owes your people…"

"Then I must die." The tribesman said evenly. "For to not repay a Meihi debt of life is shame. You have saved me. Protected me. You have spoken to me as man. For all these things, I must repay you. It is Meihi way."

Kintsusei hesitated for a moment. Then he smiled, nodding his head.

"All right." He agreed. "Then if you feel that way, come with me and join up with the Shougun's army. You took that blade as though you'd be a strong warrior, even if you've never been trained to fight before. If you really want to stay with me, then that's what you should do. Fight for my cause — for the freedom and safety of all of Kutou's people. Tribes, clans and native blood — all of us. Will you do that?"

The fairskinned man hesitated, then he nodded his head, silver hair falling over his shoulder as he did so.

"I will." He agreed gravely. "I will do as you say."

"And if you're going to be a person, again, you need to have a name." Kintsusei told him, resting a hand on his shoulder as he did so. "You don't remember your true name at all? The name your mother gave you?"

"Mother is gone. Dead, I think. I don't know."

"Mine too." Kintsusei sighed. "She died when I was seven. But she chose

my name for me — Kintsusei. And the last character of that name means 'life', so I do my best to live, even though she doesn't."

He eyed his companion keenly.

"You really don't remember?"

His companion shook his head, knowing he was lying, but not wanting to dredge those memories from the depths of his heart. At his cool, impassive gaze, Kintsusei frowned.

"Then will you allow me to give you a name?"

"Yes. If you wish."

"Then I'm going to call you 'Hyoushin.' Kintsusei decided." Because when you flew at that man, it wasn't hot anger in your eyes. It was cold rage — colder than anything I ever saw in anyone's eyes before. You hated him, I could tell that — and when you struck his head from his body, it was like you were taking vengeance, but not in a hot, passionate way. It was like ice… like your very soul was frozen towards him. So… so will you let me call you Hyoushin? Even if it is a name in my language — will you allow me to call you that?"

"Hyoushin… means… ice?"

"Heart of ice." Kintsusei nodded, and the man offered a faint smile.

"I will be that name." He agreed. "I will speak your language, now, always. I will be like you — soldier. And I will fight for Kutou peace. I will do as you ask me. I will repay Meihi debt."

"Then we should make a move, if you can, with that arm — it still looks bloody." Kintsusei sounded concerned, and the newly named Hyoushin shrugged his shoulders.

"It is only pain." He said quietly. "I live with pain often. It will not stop me. We will go."

Kintsusei eyed him for a moment, then nodded his head. "Then we'll go this way. I know a way back to where camp is, and it's simpler than going back the way we came."

He bent to claim the swords of the slain men, offering his companion a grin.

"We'll take these and then the Shougun will know we fought and didn't run away." He added. "He doesn't believe in cowardice… he believes in battle, and he doesn't tolerate those who run away. One day I want to be like him — and maybe even be Shougun, if I'm lucky. Nakago is the strongest soldier in the whole of Kutou — maybe even in the whole of the

world, I don't know. Everyone respects him. He's going to unite all four of the lands under one sky, and then… everyone will be able to live in peace."

"In peace." Hyoushin digested this, then he nodded.

"I will come." He agreed softly. "To see ShougunTo be part of… Kutou's peace. And for Kintsusei… I will repay Meihi debt. While I have life."

"I still don't think it's that big a debt…"

"To free me from chains, from beating, from not being a person any more?" Hyoushin spoke dispassionately, but there was a flicker of something in his violet eyes. "To see every day the death of kinsmen and to see them tossed into holes like dead animals? This is big debt. I must repay."

"But you're no freer if you give your life to me!"

"I am free. You are not like them." Hyoushin glanced at him, and a flare of genuine warmth flickered in his gaze, echoing the one that had, very faintly, wrapped itself around his frozen, battered heart.

*"Because of KintsuseiHyoushin is free. Has name. Is alive. And I will repay. **I will repay**."*

"Hyoushin-sama?"

Aoiketsu's voice brought him back to himself and he turned, his fingers closing around the arrowhead as he cast his junior a faintly quizzical glance.

"Where do you want us to start our search, Commander?" Aoiketsu's eyed his leader keenly, and a twitch of irritation touched Hyoushin's expression as he realised how close he had come to relinquishing his grip on his composure. Releasing his hold on the arrowhead, he did not even watch as it clattered onto the hard stone, instead turning his attention back to the matter at hand.

"The Lord Kintsusei is sure that the Shrine of the Scale is somewhere in these caves, and in this opinion he is joined by Lord Kikei." He said slowly, his words careful and even as though even now, so many years on, he sought to eradicate his Meihi accent from his speech. "I have been through these passages before… and I do not believe there are many places for such a place to be hidden. There is, of course, a possibility that the shrine is beneath the water of the lake — but for the time being, we will confine our search to the tunnels leading off from here."

He paused, his eyes narrowing as he gauged the distance of the two openings at the rear of the cave, then he nodded, raising his arm to

flex a finger in their direction.

“That is where we will begin.” He said softly. “Aoiketsu, you will take the path on the right. Search for any sign of the divine Seiryuu, and report back to me what you see. Maichu…” He turned to the other soldier. “You take the path on the left. Do the same as Aoiketsu, and report anything you find. I will scour this chamber myself. It is by far the greatest — and I have some prior knowledge. Do not dally — we have specific orders not to return without knowledge of the scale, and I would rather make the ride back before dark.”

“Yes, sir.” The two men saluted, immediately dispersing to their intended destinations, and Hyoushin watched them go dispassionately, detached from their youth and enthusiasm as he turned his attention to his own task.

“The Shrine of the Scale.” He murmured. “When Kintsusei-sama and I were here so long ago, neither of us imagined…”

He raised an absent finger to brush against the place on his arm where a jagged white scar still marked his battle wound, and a faint smile flickered at the edges of his lips.

“The irony of the fact that Seiryuu’s sacred water may have saved the life of a Meihi, a people who never undertook to worship the Azure Dragon of the East.” He murmured. “Yet, that is not my concern. Kintsusei-sama’s wishes must be obeyed. And that means… somewhere in this chamber there is a clue to the whereabouts of this holy scale.”

He pursed his lips, knowing that, for all of Aoiketsu’s queasiness for blood and Maichu’s inherent impetuosity, the two men he had picked to bring with him were probably the most observant of the small entourage of soldiers he felt were beyond doubt the Emperor’s loyal men. Both were young, eager to please and serve, and he had taken advantage of that fact, knowing that they would work twice as hard and as long as their more experienced comrades simply for the joy of doing their Emperor’s will.

Such men pleased Hyoushin, if he allowed anything to please him at all.

This place disturbed him, however, and as he moved around the chamber restlessly, he found his mind wandering more than once away from the matter at hand. This cave had been his new beginning, but it also drew him back to memories of the lord who had once governed this territory and he knew that, only a few miles from where they stood, several of his people had been tossed into a mass grave

like animals, beaten, starved and worked to the bone before being replaced with newer, younger bodies. The slave trade in Kutou had thrived under the previous Emperor, despite attempts to quash it in other reigns, for Shoukitei had not cared for much beyond his own pleasures and interests, and although he knew that Kintsusei had done his best to outlaw the practice, enforcing it in a wartorn nation had not been easy. Consequently he knew that, although he had his freedom and his dignity, others had not been so lucky. So long as his back bore the deep weal scars of the master's whip, he would never fully forget, and for that reason, he knew he would go to any lengths to help Kintsusei achieve Kutou's peace.

And yet, it was easier when the memories did not return. That he could be Hyoushin was enough — the man who lived to serve the Emperor, who had always treated him as a friend, not as his property. Nothing else mattered. He was not called upon to make decisions, only act upon Kintsusei's will. And so long as he kept things in their proper place, he was content.

Something at the side of the water caught his attention and he crouched, bending to better observe it. As he did so, he realised his worst fears had been confirmed — that the engraving was a likeness of the Dragon, probably placed there by ancient hands in a time before current day script. It was crude and badly worn by the lapping water, but it told Hyoushin what he wanted to know.

The Shrine of the Scale was indeed beneath the sacred lake that had helped to heal his arm so many years before. And to reach it, they would have to delve beneath the surface.

"Hyoushin-sama, there's no sign of anything in the right-hand tunnel. Just a dead end." At that moment Aoiketsu returned, and Hyoushin raised his gaze, nodding slightly. He gestured to his find, his expression as impassive as if their mission had not just become several times more difficult.

"I think it is here." He said quietly. "We will have to delve deeper. As befits the Dragon that lives in water, the Shrine of the Scale is beneath the surface. We must go into the sacred lake itself, in order to retrieve it."

"Sacred…?" Aoiketsu stared. "Is it truly so, sir? Is this place truly blessed by Seiryuu?"

"If the shrine is here, that should answer your question." Hyoushin said simply. "Fetch Maichu. We must regroup, and consider how best to tackle this."

“Yes, sir.” Aoiketsu bowed his head, then hurried off to find his comrade, and Hyoushin reached down a tentative finger to touch the water, feeling a faint prickle as his skin brushed against the surface. It had been the same sensation he had felt years ago, and in his heart he knew that this was the place.

“Suiko’s shrine is here, beyond doubt.” He reflected. “Now it just falls to me to find a way to infiltrate it, and bring the relic to the surface.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Seven

"Calm down, Miaka-chan. I can't understand a word you're saying."

Keisuke's brows knitted together in confusion, leaning up against the wall as he listened to his sister's panicked explanation of the evening's events. "Hikari's done what? Take a deep breath and start over again… in coherent language, if you don't mind. It's late and I'm not following anything."

"She's… gone into… the book." Miaka said unevenly, and at her words, Keisuke's eyes widened.

"What?" He murmured. "You're not serious. *The* book? The… Shijin-Tenchishou?"

"Yes." Miaka's voice shook. "I'm sure, Oniichan. Taka too. We both… we felt… I'm sure of it. She's gone… into the book."

"Miaka, this doesn't make any sense." Keisuke frowned, his gaze flitting to the door of the living room where his wife was still up watching the late night news. "How could Hikari get near the book? For a start, it's locked in the library. For another thing, why would she even know to go there? And thirdly, she was with you when Mayo and I left… what the hell happened between us leaving and you calling me right now?"

"It… it's difficult to properly explain." Miaka admitted. "Kei-nii, Hikari… broke a rule. We… there was an… argument, and Hikari said some things about Taka — things she'd overheard us talking about, when we discussed Tamahome without even thinking whether she or Makoto were around at the time. It was… she was angry, and she stormed out. She said she was going to Arina's, but I've called there, and Arina said she hasn't seen her. Taka's gone there now, to make doubly sure, in case Arina's covering for her — but she sounded genuinely non-plussed on the telephone. And when… we went… to look for her, both of us had the same feeling. That she'd somehow gone into the book."

"But Hikari doesn't know anything about the Shijin-Tenchishou, does she?"

"No." Miaka agreed. "But… oh, Keisuke, I'm sorry. I'm all over the

place. I know it sounds insane, but I'm certain. That is where she's gone. Taka thinks so too. We're both sure of it. I can't explain how or why, but just that she… has. That she went to the library this evening, for whatever reason, instead of going to Arina's house."

"It seems something of a wild coincidence, Miaka-chan." Keisuke sounded doubtful. "That that's where she'd be. Look, let me get my coat. I'll grab my keys and come help you out. I'll have to tell Mayo something, so give me a few minutes — but another pair of eyes might be what you need. And she might yet have gone to her friend's house — teenagers are notoriously good at keeping one another's secrets. Likely the girl knows more than she's telling."

"Keisuke…" Miaka hesitated, then she sighed. "Yes, if you come, that would… help. I'm sorry. I know it's late, I know it's bad timing, I'm really sorry. But I'm scared. I'm scared that Suzaku is the reason she got called in, and…"

"Woah, stop it right there." Keisuke said firmly. "You have absolutely no reason to suppose that anything like that is ever going to happen again. When Mayo went there the last time, those ends were tied once and for all. That Kounan of yours was saved and that was the end of it. There's no reason for Suzaku to want Hikari — you're jumping to conclusions."

"No, I'm not." Miaka's voice was little more than a whisper. "Keisuke, Mayo and I were able to summon Suzaku because… because… Hikari was my Shinzahou. The thing in which I put my faith and Suzaku's power — the combination of Taka and my love for one another. Hikari… Hikari is Suzaku's more even than I was… and I never even thought about it. But when I felt… I'm sure. I'm sure that's where she's gone. And I can't go in after her, Oniichan. I can't go back to that world!"

Hearing that his sister was on the verge of hysterics, Keisuke sighed.

"Look. Go sit down, have a drink, try and calm down a little. I'll be there as soon as I can." He said quietly. "And we'll work things out from there. It's been a long night, and it might be more easily resolved than you think."

There was a pause, then,

"All right." Miaka agreed reluctantly. "Thanks, Kei-nii. Please… don't be too long."

"I promise." Keisuke assured her. "Do as I say and take some deep

breaths. I'm sure it will all be fine."

"I hope so." Came Miaka's response. "Bye, Oniichan. See you soon."

The line went dead at this, and Keisuke frowned, glancing at the receiver before replacing it on the hook.

"Hikari… in the book?" He murmured, rubbing his temples. "Is it possible? Even if it's true — well, knowing that it is true, that Hikari was the vessel… but she has no reason to go to the library, and Suzaku… could Suzaku have lured her into the book world, the way he lured Miaka? Is this really all beginning again, just when it finally seemed to be over?"

"Keisuke?" Mayo's voice came from the doorway of the living room, and Keisuke's frown deepened as he shook his head.

"I have to go to Miaka." He said quietly. "I'm sorry, Mayo. I do. There was some kind of a fight after we left, and Hikari took off — Taka and Miaka can't find her, and Miaka's practically beside herself at the moment. She's got some crazy idea that the kid's got sucked into the book — I need to go help them, before she loses it completely."

"*The* book?" Mayo's eyes widened. "*Hikari*? But…"

"I know. It's crazy." Keisuke said grimly. "But just in case it's true… I need to be there for my sister."

Mayo glanced at him for a moment, then she nodded resolutely.

"Me too." She said firmly. "Let me just speak with our neighbour, and ask her to come keep an eye on Sumi."

"Mayo-chan…"

"This concerns me as much or more as it does you, if it's to do with the Shijin-Tenchishou." Mayo shook her head. "I'm coming with you, Keisuke. If this is about the book, I'm coming too."

Where was she now?

Slowly and cautiously Hikari opened her eyes, a murmur escaping her lips as she registered her aching, battered body. With some difficulty she pulled herself into a sitting position, gazing around her with dazed, uncomprehending eyes. What had been a desolate landscape a few moments earlier now seemed to be teeming with life, with birds arcing and wheeling over her head and each tree rich with vivid green foliage. Over the rise, she could see signs of buildings, and

in the distance, the great shadow of the mountain no longer seemed to be so looming and ominous, specked as it was with patches of green.

“What the hell?” She whispered. “This… am I still dreaming? Did I *really* fall asleep… in the library?”

“So, you are alive then.”

A girl’s voice made her jump and she flinched back, gazing around her as she sought the source of the voice. There was a chuckle, then a sweep of air, as a slight, nimble figure leapt down in front of her, eying her with a mixture of derision and outright curiosity.

“You know, you were in pretty rough shape — I half thought you’d been burned up already.”

“Rough…?” Hikari faltered, glancing down at herself and letting out a cry of dismay as she registered her charred, ragged clothing. The girl’s lips twitched into a smile, and she nodded.

“You were lucky.” She added. “This ain’t so far from Kaou-zan, and it’s well known what *they* like to do to young women… unless, of course, that’s where you’ve been and why you’re so messed up… but you don’t look like the kind of girl who’s used to fighting her corner. They probably would’a killed you already.”

At this, Hikari’s gaze snapped up, gazing at the stranger in alarm. The girl shrugged.

“That’s how it is, if you’re careless in mountain country.” She said carelessly. “You should be more careful, travelling alone.”

“Who… who are you?” Hikari found her tongue, and the girl smiled.

“Depends on who you are.” She said categorically. “You sure don’t look like you come from Souun or one of the villages round here. You could be a spy, and I’m not giving you information you don’t need to have.”

“Spy? Information?” Now Hikari found her temper overtaking her disorientation and she got to her feet, putting her hands on her hips. “Look, you little brat…”

“Now, now. That ain’t any way to speak to someone you don’t even know.” The girl’s eyes glittered and she shook her head. “You’re in no position to call me a brat, looking like you’re going to cry. You tell me who you are, and I’ll tell you my name. Otherwise, forget it.”

“I don’t really care that much.” Hikari snapped, turning her back on

her companion. “I don’t have time to mess with strange kids who invade my dreaming. I need to wake up, and go home, and…”

She faltered, as she felt the prick of something against her back and then the sound of the girl’s laughter once more.

“You sure talk weird.” The girl said reflectively. “But you don’t seem to understand. This here is bandit country, and this land… this is Reikaku-zan territory. If you won’t tell me who you are, I haven’t a choice. You’ll have to be my prisoner, and I’ll have to take you back to the mountain with me.”

Hikari turned, her breath catching in her throat as she registered the cause of the pricking — the girl now held a long, sharp blade in her hand, and from the way in which she wielded it, Hikari realised that she knew how to use it. She swallowed, taking a step away.

“So what, you’re going to kill me if I refuse?” She shot back. “A kid like you?”

“I’m not a kid. I’m a bandit.” The girl’s eyes narrowed, and Hikari regretted her bluntness as the blade shifted from her body to her throat, forcing her back against the hard stone that flanked the ravine. “You need to learn a lot of things, girly — whoever you are. Now it’s time you tell me — where did you come from, and what do you want here?”

Hikari swallowed hard, noting the resolute glint in the girl’s eye. Her opponent was no taller than she was, and certainly no older, and yet there was something in her demeanour that told of a confidence and conviction beyond her young years. She was attractive in the way of a predator, her bronze eyes bright with life and determination, and her thick waves of flame-coloured hair weaved around her face like the mane of a hunting lion on the prowl. She was dressed in something that Hikari’s ignorant eyes could only interpret as a cross between a fighter’s outfit and something out of a book of ancient peasant dress, and at her belt hung the scabbard for her sword, as well as another for what looked like some kind of long leather whip.

“I’m waiting for an answer.” The girl said at this moment, breaking Hikari’s reverie with a prick of the blade against her throat. “Tell me. Who are you and where did you come from?”

“If this is a dream, all I have to do is wake up and you’ll go away!” Hikari snapped, and the girl laughed.

“And if it isn’t, I could slit your throat.” She said evenly. “Take your pick… do you want to risk it?”

Hikari faltered, and her companion's eyes glittered curiously.

"You really are weird, you know." She added.

"I'm not weird. I'm not the one dressed like some historical artefact, waving swords around and talking about killing people!" Hikari exclaimed.

"So answer my question, and I'll drop the blade. I don't want to kill you." The girl said reasonably. "Either way, you'll have to come with me to Reikaku-zan, anyway — it's for the Kashira to decide what happens to people who invade bandit land, not me. But even if that's true, I can hurt you, if it loosens up your tongue. So you better tell me."

Hikari grimaced.

"I come from Tokyo." She said flatly, and the girl's eyes widened.

"To… kyo?" She repeated. "Where the hell's that? Somewhere in Sairou? Did you cross over the border from the western lands — is that why you look so friggin' weird?"

"Sairou?" Hikari frowned. "I don't know what you mean. And how can you not know what Tokyo is? Hell, everyone in Japan knows where Tokyo is — probably in the world."

"Japan?" Slowly the blade slipped away from her throat. "I don't know what you're talking about, girly, and it makes no sense to me. What is this Japan?"

Hikari opened her lips to snap back, but something in the girl's expression made her falter, and a stab of fear washed through her as she once again had the impression she had left her home and her world far behind her somehow.

"Where I live." She whispered. "But… this isn't… this isn't Japan. This is… somewhere else."

"And you think I'm an idiot." The girl snorted, sheathing her sword and shaking her head. "This is Kounan, you moron. The Southern Kingdom. You must've taken a whack to the head — or you're really crazy."

"I'm not crazy." Hikari protested, though inwardly she wondered if she was telling the truth. "Ive never heard of Kounan… or Sairou… or anything like that. I don't know where I am or how I got here. I don't know what Reikaku-zan is, or who you are, or any of that. I was in the libary, and then… then… a wasteland… and now… here."

“A library, huh?” The girl’s brow furrowed. “In Souun?”

“Souun?” Hikari looked blank, and her companion sighed shaking her head.

“Fine. Whatever. You don’t know.” She said resignedly, grabbing the bewildered middle school student by the arm and tugging her in the direction of the mountain path. “You’d still better come with me.”

“Hey, let me go!”

“I told you, you haven’t a choice. You have to come to the Kashira, now.” The girl shook her head, and despite her attempts, Hikari could not pull out of her grip. “Stop fighting me, you pain — if you’re not a spy, you don’t have anything to worry about. The Kashira ain’t gonna rape you, you know — this is Reikaku-zan. That doesn’t happen here.”

“Rape me?” Hikari stared at her in abject horror, and her companion rolled her eyes.

“Yeesh, you really are a weirdo.” She muttered. “Do you really think that, if I left you here, some brawny idiot from Kaou-zan wouldn’t come drag you off to their peak instead? At least if you come with me, you have a chance… geez.”

“I never asked for your help!”

“And you’re not getting it. You’re my prisoner.” Came the response. “Shut your yap and just come, will ya? I don’t want to pull my sword on you again, but I will, if I have to.”

Hikari glowered, but fell silent, and for a while she allowed herself to be dragged up the mountainside. Then, at length,

“You didn’t tell me your name, girl.” Her captor said evenly. “Better do it, before we get to the top — I like to know what I’m reporting before I report it.”

“You didn’t tell me yours, either.” Hikari said sullenly, and the girl sighed.

“You’re a worse baby than Meikyo, you know that? And she’s eight years old.” She said disparagingly. “Grow up and answer me, will you?”

“You answer me.” Hikari retorted, not knowing or caring who Meikyo was or why she was being compared to an eight year old girl. “You tell me your name and I’ll tell you mine.”

“Fine.” The girl sounded exasperated. “Shishi. My name is Shishi. All right?”

“Shi… shi?” Hikari stared, and her companion nodded.

“That’s right. Shishi.” She agreed. “And you?”

“H..Hikari.” Hikari admitted.

“Right. Hikari.” Shishi pursed her lips. “Well, it could be worse, I suppose…”

“What do you mean? *Your* name is Shishi!” Hikari exclaimed, and her companion bristled.

“Shut your face.” She said angrily. “You’re an idiot, so you don’t know anything, but it’s not just a random name, you know.”

“So what..you’re a mountain lion?” Hikari asked sarcastically, though as she rested her gaze on her companion again, she realised that the girl was not ill-named — she did indeed have the appearance of a predatorial cat, with her wild red hair fluttering behind her in the wind. Shishi nodded.

“Yes.” She agreed. “That’s right. And because when I was born… because of the stars, too.”

She cast a brief glance upwards, then shrugged.

“Stars are kind of important on the mountain. To the Kashira especially.” She admitted. “When I was born, it was Shishiza ruling the sky. So I’m Shishi. See?”

“Shishiza.” Hikari murmured. “Leo. The constellation of the lion, right?”

“You do know something, then. You’re not completely braindead.”

“I’m not at all braindead!” Hikari objected. Shishi merely snorted derisively, shaking her head.

“We’re almost there.” She said instead. “So do as I say and shut your trap, all right?”

Before Hikari could retort, they came into view of some buildings, and with a jolt the school girl realised that they were now more than halfway up the mountainside, for she could look down on the landscape below and see for several miles around. As she gazed, spellbound at the view, a man ambled out from one of the structures, exchanging a few words with Shishi, then turning his attention to her.

“Hikari, huh?” He said, his accent thick with the same mountain dialect that laced Shishi’s tones, and despite herself, Hikari flinched as she took in his big, well-stocked appearance. He was clearly a fighting

man, with a scar running from his cheek to his jaw and a rough mop of dark hair over a makeshift warrior's headband. He was dressed in similarly strange attire, but as she met his gaze, Hikari was slightly comforted by the warm look in his eyes.

"You better come with me to Genrou." He said evenly. "Shishi, you too."

"Yes, Aniue." Shishi nodded her head, giving Hikari a shove. "Follow him, you moron. Unless you'd rather go jumpin' off the mountain ledges, there is only one way you can go, now."

Hikari started, then glowered at her, but she did as she was bidden, allowing herself to be led into the depths of the mountain itself.

"Where did you say this kid came from?" The man asked Shishi, as they walked.

"She said something like To… kyo." Shishi frowned, furrowing her brow as she sought to remember. "In… Ja..pan? Does that mean anything to you, Aniue? I never heard of it — is it in Sairou? I thought she might be from the West, but she says she ain't…"

"Sairou…" The man frowned, shaking his head. "No. But you did right, bringin' her here. Damn it if she doesn't remind me of someone, or something…"

As he fixed her with a searching gaze, Hikari was suddenly aware of how badly torn her clothing was, and she flushed, wrapping her arms protectively around her body.

"Don't look at me like that!" She exclaimed.

"She's a complete idiot." Shishi said disparagingly, giving Hikari an elbow as she did so. "Didn't I already tell you that noone's going to rape you on Reikaku-zan? Geez. Get a grip and shut up for two seconds, all right? Else I'll wish I'd left you in the ravine to be eaten by real wolves!"

"*Real*… wolves?" Hikari frowned. "What other kind of wolves are there?"

"Phantom ones, in this mountain." The tall man said easily, as they reached a door, and he raised his hand, knocking on it.

"Excuse me! Who is it? It's Kouji, with Shishi, and someone to see the kashira. Welcome, good buddy Kouji, come right on in. Thank you very much!"

Hikari stared at him, bewildered, as he pushed back the wooden

doors, and Shishi shrugged her shoulders.

“He always does it like that.” She said evenly.

“And you think *I’m* mad.” Hikari snapped. “This place is full of lunatics. This *must* be a dream — and I want to wake up!”

“Shut up instead.” Shishi advised, pushing her firmly into the room that Kouji had already entered, and closing the door behind them. Hikari opened her mouth to retort, but the words died on her lips as she met Kouji’s gaze. He was not alone, for another man, of similar age and build now stood beside him, casting a gaze over her in much the same way as Kouji had originally done. There was something different about this man, however — and though the chamber in which they stood was not grandiose, nor was there any sense of ceremony about it, Hikari somehow knew that this was the ‘kashira’ — the boss that Shishi had mentioned with so much respect. Like Shishi, he was flame-haired, his locks bound at intervals in a long tail down his back. He was not exactly handsome, but nor was he ugly and there was something about him that demanded a second look. His bright bronze eyes and his lean, defined features made her realise that this was what Kouji had meant — about phantom wolves in the mountain. The tip of a fanged tooth protruded from his lip as he regarded her, and bright gems dangled from his ears, complementing his flamboyant, showy dress. Across his back, a silver fan was strapped, and Hikari was struck by the oddness of this choice of implement, when both Shishi and Kouji were well armed with swords.

For a moment, noone spoke. Then, this man stepped forward, his eyes flickering with disbelief as he took in Hikari’s appearance.

“Shit.” He murmured, then, “*Miaka*?”

Chapter 9

Chapter Eight

“I’ll go, Hyoushin-sama.”

As they gazed down at the rippling, glittering water, Aoiketsu was the first to speak, already loosening the ties to his armour as he prepared to shed it to dive beneath the blue. “I’ll swim down and see if I can see any sign of the relic. I can hold my breath longer than Maichu can — and if it is down here I’m sure I can find it.”

“Are you sure you won’t get *scared*, going into the dark by yourself?” Maichu bantered, and Aoiketsu sent his comrade a dark look, shaking his head.

“I don’t like *blood*. I’m not bothered by the dark, by water, or by room-mates who shoot their mouths off.” He said bluntly.

“With you, it’s hard to know, sometimes.” Maichu returned neatly. “Whoever heard of a soldier who passed out before he even got into battle?”

“Do you want me to hit you?”

“Like you’d dare.” Maichu raised an eyebrow. “You’d be too scared to blood your fist.”

“Or your nose!”

Hyoushin cast them a glance, holding up his hand for silence, and any retort Maichu would have made died immediately on his lips as he caught the Commander’s eye and remembered where he was. For a moment there was quiet, then the Meihi nodded his head, flexing his long, pale fingers in Aoiketsu’s direction.

“Do it.” He agreed softly. “Come back and report what you find. Don’t attempt to disturb anything on your own. Do you understand? This is a precious article to the Emperor — I don’t want to see it damaged.”

“Understood, sir.” Aoiketsu nodded, saluting and then unfastening the final ties of his armour, removing it and setting it down on the cold stone as he rolled up the sleeves of his undershirt, preparing to dive into the cold. “I’ll scout around and see if I can see where it is, and I’ll come back and report what I see.”

Hyoushin tilted his head slightly in acknowledgement, and Aoiketsu took a deep breath, before diving neatly and cleanly into the slick, sacred water. Despite his weakness for blood, he was one of the strongest swimmers in the Meihi's retinue, and he had not been idly bragging when he had claimed to be better at holding his breath than his companion. In fact, he mused ruefully, as he plunged deeper beneath the surface, he was better at most things than many of his comrades.

"Except that Maichu's right. I'll never get into a battle situation and be able to defend my country and my Emperor at this rate." He muttered, stroking through the water towards the wall on which Hyoushin had found the top of the carving. Running his fingers along the stone, he made out the characters for 'water' and 'call' and he frowned, his brows knitting as he realised they flanked what looked like an opening in the rock. Putting his hands against it, he pushed it with all his strength, finding that the lower half of the wall slid down to reveal an opening. As the water gushed through into the sudden air space, Aoiketsu found himself pushed forward, and he bit his lip, knowing that he could not risk going any further without taking more air.

As he trod water into the chamber beyond, however, he became aware of the water level dropping, as if compressed by some unseen force. As his head broke the surface, he set his feet down on the blue marble stone beneath his feet, turning to gaze in confusion back the way he had come.

Sure enough, the pool which he had swum through to reach this point was still flooded, and yet, despite the opening in the rock, the waves of sacred liquid had been repelled back.

"As if parted by magic?" He whispered. "Weird. I better go back and tell the Commander — at least if there's air down here, we can breathe."

To think was to act, and he turned on his heel, pushing back into the icy water and kicking back up to the cavern above.

"Well?"

As his head broke the surface, Hyoushin crouched at the edge of the pool, eying him quizzically. "You were longer than I anticipated — I didn't realise you could hold your breath for quite that long, Aoiketsu."

"I didn't. Not exactly." Aoiketsu shook his head, reaching out for the side of the sacred lake as he did so. "But there's a chamber

beneath this one, sir. When I opened the door to it, it was like it had some kind of barrier around it. I could get through it, but the water didn't… it was pushed back. I don't know what could have caused it… unless it's the Emperor's relic."

"The shrine itself, perhaps." Hyoushin pursed his lips. "Interesting. And you think that it can be explored further, without the need for you to come back for air?"

"There seems to be enough air down there, Hyoushin-sama." Aoiketsu nodded.

Hyoushin looked thoughtful for a moment, then he gestured to Maichu.

"Go with him. The two of you will be better than one." He said at length. "Take note of anything you find — any writings, any depictions, anything which may lead you to the scale of Seiryuu."

"Are you… not coming too, Commander?" Aoiketsu looked startled. Hyoushin shook his head, a wry, humourless smile touching his pale lips.

"I am a Meihi." He said softly. "I am not a man of Seiryuu. My presence might not be well interpreted by any sacred spirit that lives beneath this place. I will wait for you here… I will not risk tainting the Emperor's relic."

"Well, we'll grab it, that's for sure." Maichu was already half out of his armour. "If a girl like Aoi can get down there, it shouldn't be a problem for me."

"Commander, the door to the underwater chamber had two characters written alongside it." Aoiketsu ignored his companion's taunting, meeting Hyoushin's gaze with an earnest one of his own. 'The characters for "water' and for" call ". Is that significant — should we look for that again, to lead us to the place?"

Hyoushin's eyes flickered as he considered.

"My knowledge of your written word is not as good as it might be, at times." He admitted at length. 'Yet I believe that would make sense. The scale of Seiryuu contains a shard of the God's magic known in text as "Suiko'. I believe that name could be written with the characters you describe."

"Then we look for it again." Aoiketsu nodded his head. "Right."

He cast Maichu a sidelong glance.

“Are you coming, slowcoach?”

“I’m with you, wimp.” Maichu kicked off his boots, clambering into the water. “All right. You lead the way. Show me where this hidden chamber is, and I’ll show you where the scale is hidden, no problem.”

“You don’t lack confidence, do you?” Aoiketsu snorted, and Maichu spread his hands.

“One of us has to be a man, and it ain’t you.” He returned neatly, cuffing his friend over the head. “Come on, idiot. Let’s go dig out this ancient piece of holy magic for Kintsusei-sama!”

For a moment there was silence in the bandit chamber, as the red-haired stranger stared at Hikari with a mixture of bewilderment and mystification. He stepped hesitantly forward, reaching out a finger to touch her, and as he poked her brow, she flinched back from him, casting him a reproachful look.

“Hey!”

“You’re real.” Tasuki murmured. “But what the hell…?”

He frowned, gazing at her anew, and now he was so close to her Hikari was even more aware of his wolfish appearance, realising that whoever had chosen his nickname had chosen one which suited his character as well as his looks.

“You’re *not* Miaka.” He seemed to realise at length. “But shit, today is my day for double-takes. First Boushin, now…”

He reached out to poke her again, and she swiped his hand away, her uncertainty flaring her temper as she glared back at him.

“Stop prodding me like I’m some freak or something!” She exclaimed. “Of course I’m not Miaka, you idiot wolf man — why the hell would you think that I was?”

The bandit leader stared at her for a moment, as if taken aback by her vitriolic reaction, and Hikari bit her lip, suddenly remembering that not only Shishi but the bandit named Kouji were present in the chamber… both armed, and both, no doubt, ready to defend their Kashira’s honour if it was so required.

There was another moment of silence, then a door at the far end of the room swung open to reveal a woman of approximately the Kashira’s age, thick dark hair swept back in a warrior’s queue behind her head, and a curious look in her vivid dark eyes. Like Shishi, her

attire was that of a peasant woman crossed with a fighter, and a sharp, well-kept blade hung at her waist. Though she was clearly part of the wolf's bandit entourage, however, there was something very feminine about this new arrival, and as she glanced at the scene, she frowned, pursing her lips.

"Genrou, what's all the noise?" She asked, confused. "Someone said Shishi brought back a prisoner…"

At which point Hikari was aware of Shishi's cheeks flaring red, as for the first time the young bandit looked discomfitted.

"She kinda dropped on me, sort of." She said, a note of defensiveness in her words. "I didn't choose to, but I couldn't leave her on the mountain, could I? Not with Kaou-zan just over the rise and besides, I didn't know if she was a spy or what the hell she was. She's dressed weird and she talks a lot of rubbish."

"This is her?" The woman stepped forward, pausing at Genrou's right hand as she glanced at Hikari, and her gaze softened slightly as she seemed to interpret the young girl's apprehension and uncertainty. "Genrou, what did you do to her? She looks petrified."

"Hey, *she's* the one yellin' at me." This seemed to stir the Kashira from his confusion, casting the woman an indignant look. "Not the other way around. And Shishi brought her here in this state. Noone here's done anything to her."

"He called her Miaka, Anzu." Kouji said quietly. "An' now I think of it, she does look… like Suzaku no Miko. Now he's said it, I… I can see it too."

"Suzaku no…?" A strange look flickered across Anzu's expression at this, and she slipped a gentle finger beneath Hikari's chin, raising her soot-smudged face to her own as she gazed at her appearance. "Do you think she's a girl… from the other world, then?"

"All the girls in that world don't look like Miaka." Genrou said sharply. "Besides, she *ain't* Miaka.…that ain't possible. But dammit, she… for a moment, I thought…"

He turned his sharp, bronze gaze back on his hapless, bewildered captive, fixing her with a quizzical look.

"So who are you and where did you come from?" He asked quietly. "You know that Reikaku-zan is protected territory… you can't just wander in and out."

"I *told* her that." Shishi said evenly. "But she's weird, Kashira. She

doesn't seem to understand anything. She didn't even know where Souun was — or at least, she claimed not to. She might've been lying."

"Shishi, enough." Anzu cast the impetuous young redhead a glance, and Shishi flushed once more, sending the woman a reproachful look.

"It's true! I was just saying." She said sullenly. "*I* brought her here, after all."

"*You* weren't supposed to leave the mountain." Anzu said softly. "Until you and I had had a word about your adventures on Kaou-zan yesterday morning. If not for Kouji's seeing you, you could've been in a lot of trouble, Shishi… why were you out in the valley anyway?"

"I… that is… well…" Shishi faltered, and Anzu raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Instead she turned her gaze back on the hapless Hikari.

"What is your name, girl?" She asked softly, her tones gentle. "Noone here will hurt you, but we need to know where you came from and why you're here."

"S… S… Sukunami Hikari." Hikari gathered her composure, finding a faint amount of comfort in the woman's dark eyes. "And I don't know what any of you are talking about. I don't know anything about a Miko or another world or what this Souun place is. I don't even know where Kaou-zan is, or how I came to be here."

"*Sukunami*?" Genrou's eyes widened with disbelief, and he gripped her by the arms, peering at her yet more closely, before cursing profusely.

"Shit! You're Tama's brat?! You really did come from… you're Miaka and Tama's brat!"

"Let me go!" Hikari fought to free herself from the bandit's eager grip, and Anzu rested a hand on the Kashira's shoulders, shaking her head.

"You're scaring her." She said softly. "If she did come from Suzaku no Miko's world — if she *is* Miaka-sama's daughter — she probably doesn't understand anything about Reikaku-zan or who we even are."

"Are you sayin' Tama an' Miaka are so cold as to forget all about us, when they went back?" Genrou demanded.

"My father is *Sukunami Taka*!" Hikari finally wrenched herself free. "I don't know any Tama and I don't know any of you!"

Genrou eyed her for a moment, then he pursed his lips, casting a

glance at Kouji.

“Go to the village, huh?” He said softly. “Get Chichiri. Tell him to come here — no matter what my sister says or how much she wails about him bein’ called out an’ about twice in one day — I don’t care. I don’t understand this — any o’ this — but I’m sure it has somethin’ to do with the marks an’ what Bou… Reizeitei-sama was sayin’ only this morning. Go fetch him up here, huh? Tell him we’ve had a visitor, an’ it’s someone he really needs to see to believe.”

“On my way.” Kouji nodded his head. “But Genrou, you need to find the maid some clothing… I don’t think hers is gonna last a whole lot longer, if you get my drift.”

Hikari’s eyes widened at this, as she glanced down at herself anew, realising the abused outfit was beginning to come loose at the seams. Anzu sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“Leave that to me.” She said evenly. “I’ll find her something to wear. Shishi, you come too — you might as well pretend to be a girl for once, and give me a hand.”

“I’m a bandit, not a babysitter, and I don’t do primping.” Shishi said sulkily, suddenly the fourteen year old and no longer the mountain lion. “I’ll go with Aniue to see Chichiri. I don’t want to play keeper to some weird girl from another world.”

“I’ll take her, Anzu. She’ll probably be more hindrance than help to you, playing dress up.” Kouji said evenly, and Shishi’s expression became one of triumph. Anzu sighed, then shrugged.

“All right.” She said reluctantly. “But then, when you come back here, I want to talk to you. Understood? About staying within mountain bounds. This isn’t safe territory for you to be running riot in and you know that Kaou-zan have already tried to nab you on more than one occasion. Wait till you’re grown before you start trying to fight adult battles… if you go with Kouji, you stick with him and you don’t take off, all right?”

“Yes, Okaasama.” Shishi sighed in resignation, and Hikari’s gaze flitted between the impetuous, flame-haired young girl and the dark haired, gentle eyed woman, disbelief flickering in her expression as she registered their blood kinship for the first time. Anzu seemed to catch her gaze, because she laughed ruefully, nodding as she held out a hand to take Hikari’s arm.

“It’s understood, then.” Was all she said, however. “Hikari — that’s your name, isn’t it? — you come with me. We’ll clean you up and find

you something to wear… at least then you'll be decent before we have visitors."

"Visitors…?" Hikari blinked.

"Anzu, make sure you lock the door after her." Genrou said firmly. "You and Shishi know the mountain an' noone'd mess you over here. But she's a stranger — there's no sense causin' any risk. If she's Tama's girl, I ain't bein' responsible for anythin' happening to her. Even if he is a world away, he'd never forgive me an' I wouldn't put it past him comin' over to have words. Besides, it'll be dark soon an' if she's blood to Miaka she's probably goin' to try an' run off… girls are tricky that way an' I ain't taking the chance."

"All right." Anzu nodded. "I'll do that."

She smiled at Hikari again, then,

"This way." She said simply. "Follow me."

Chapter 10

Chapter Nine

So, now she was someone's prisoner.

Hikari hugged her knees as she sat hunched up on the end of the makeshift bed, casting her gaze around the stone-walled chamber as she struggled to understand what had happened to her. From the library, to a desert and now to the heart of a bandit's mountain… if it was a dream, it was getting stranger by the minute.

"But it *must* be a dream. What else can it be?" She murmured to herself. "This place is impossible. The people are impossible. The clothes… all of it… it doesn't make any sense. It's daytime here, but it was night when I left home. And that guy with the red hair — that Genrou — he called me Mother's name, but there's no way in hell Mother would know someone who lived in a place like this. Everything's got jumbled in my head, that's all. All I have to do is find a way to wake up, and everything will be back to normal."

The sound of voices outside the chamber roused her from her reverie, and she glanced up as she heard the bolt slide back with a scrape, half prepared to make a dash for it if the opportunity should arise.

"You shouldn't be locking her in, you know. It's sort of rude."

She heard a voice reproach, and then the roll of the bandit leader's mountain accent.

"Hell, it was for her own good much as anything.. The girl might not be Miaka, but she's got as much sense an' its dark outside now."

"Even so, it's a bit rough… if she really has come from that world." Now the speaker was revealed, his head turned as he finished his conversation with the bandit Kashira. "But I'll talk to her. It's all right, Tasuki… leave it with me."

"You're welcome to her!" Came the Kashira's reply, and the newcomer chuckled.

"Tasuki?" Hikari's brows drew together in confusion. "But I thought his name was Genrou… wasn't that what the others said?"

Before she could say anything, however, the stranger turned back

towards her and any words died on her lips as she took in the cruel, jagged scar that weaved across the left side of his face, covering the place where his eye had once been. At her sudden distress, the man frowned, stepping into the chamber and shutting the door behind him.

"There's no need to look like that, you know. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I… I…" Hikari faltered, and the man sighed, glancing at his hands, then shrugging. Drawing his fingers before his face, there was a blast of smoke and light and, much to Hikari's complete bewilderment, the man who stood before her suddenly lacked any disfigurement across his features. He smiled at her confusion, tilting his head on one side as he regarded her.

"Is that better?" He asked softly. Hikari stared, then swallowed hard.

"How the hell did you… make it disappear?" She faltered, and the man grinned.

"It's easy, you know." He said flippantly. "I've been doing it for years. Magic, and that kind of thing. If it's easier for you to talk to me looking like this, then I'll play along — although, Hikari-chan, how someone looks isn't necessarily an indication of who they really are."

For some reason, Hikari found herself feeling ashamed, and she dropped her gaze, unable to answer. The man stood for a moment, regarding her thoughtfully. Then he clapped his hands together, and the transformation faded.

"I don't hide behind a mask when I don't have to." He said matter-of-factly. "We are what we are and we all bear some scars, don't you think? You don't have to look at my face, if it upsets you — but I do want to talk to you. And I'm not going to hurt you. You have my word, you know."

"Are… are you another of… of the bandits?" Hikari gathered her courage, raising her gaze to his lopsided one as she struggled not to shy away from his uneven appearance. The man shook his head.

"No. I'm not a bandit." He said evenly.

"Then… why do you care about the strange girl in the mountain?" Hikari demanded bitterly. "Is this a local gawking session, or something? I've been dragged here and locked up and now everyone's coming to stare at me because they've nothing better to do?"

"Miaka is your mother, isn't she?"

The man seemed completely unphased by her annoyance, sitting himself down opposite her as he fixed her with a searching gaze. Hikari stared, startled, and the stranger nodded.

“I thought so.” He mused. “You have a sense of it about you — I should have realised sooner, that that’s what it was.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Hikari found her tongue, glaring at him. “What do you want with my mother -what is it to do with you?”

“Nothing and everything.” The man’s red eye twinkled. “Depending on your perspective, you know.”

He shrugged.

“Your father is Tamahome, then.”

“Tama…” Hikari’s eyes widened, as she remembered the conversation she had overheard between her parents and her aunt and uncle. “Tamahome? What… what’s that? My father is Taka! Sukunami Taka! I’m Sukunami Hikari — I don’t know anything about any Tamahome!?”

“Ah, yes. Taka. Tamahome, Taka.” The stranger shrugged his shoulders dismissively. “Either is as good as the other to me, since they’re the same.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m sure it would have been difficult to explain it to you.” The man agreed serenely. Then he became serious.

“I knew your parents a long time ago.” He said quietly. “We were friends… close friends. Partners, I suppose. Team-mates. You have both Miaka and Tama… Taka’s features in your face — it’s clear to see that that’s who you are, even if I wasn’t able to sense it about you, sitting this close to you. The question is… why are you here? And more importantly — how?”

“I don’t know.” Hikari folded her arms. “I don’t know, I don’t understand and I just want to go back! As if my life isn’t already messed up enough!”

“My name is Ri Hou Jun.” The stranger went on as if she hadn’t spoken. “But your parents knew me as Chichiri. The bandit leader here, in the mountains, is Genrou — but he’s also known as Tasuki. Do those words mean nothing to you at all?”

“Why should they?” Hikari snapped. “My parents aren’t the kind of

people who hang out with bandits or one eyed weirdos!"

Chichiri stared at her for a moment, then, much to Hikari's surprise, he laughed.

"You are something else." He mused. "You're really not happy to be in Kounan, are you, Hikari-chan?"

"Don't call me Hikari-chan… you don't even know me." Hikari said darkly. "And I don't even know where Kounan is, let alone…"

"And yet you managed to get here. Strange, isn't it?"

"I told you. I don't know how." Hikari said flatly. "There was a light, and then I was in the middle of a desert — a barren wasteland. And then… then I freaked out, got scared and there was another light. And I was here, with that little runt poking her sword in my back and dragging me up here to be locked in and examined like a zoo exhibit."

She glanced down at her clothes.

"And dressed like some freak from a Chinese carnival day." She added. "Strange is an understatement."

"A desert… a wasteland?" Chichiri suddenly looked alarmed. "When you first came here, that's what you saw?"

"Yes." Hikari nodded her head. "Just a dead place. It was nothing like this Kounan place, except there were mountains overlooking it, like the ones here. Otherwise… I don't know what place it was. But I didn't want to stay there. It was… dead."

There was a moment of silence, as Chichiri eyed her keenly, somehow managing to inject twice as much scrutiny into his one good eye as most people managed with two. Hikari frowned.

"Do you have to gawp at me like that?"

"I'm sorry." Chichiri held up his hands. "You're confused and I'm worried and it's not a good combination, you know? And we're getting off to a poor start."

He sighed, glancing at his hands.

"Hikari, your parents have never talked to you about Kounan, have they?" He asked softly. Slowly Hikari shook her head.

"And you have no idea who Tasuki or I are, either, do you? Or even Tamahome, even though he is your father?"

"I… I… I don't." Hikari felt her anger dissipating in light of her companion's sudden seriousness. "Although… I have heard Dad… say

Tamahome. In fact, he was talking about it… like… Tamahome was him. But I didn't understand. He talked about someone called… Sou Kishuku. And… people who died — it sounded like family. He didn't know I heard him — but I did."

Chichiri digested this, then nodded.

"Sou Kishuku was the name your father was born under." He said at length. "And those who died were his father and siblings, murdered during a war between Kounan and Kutou by a young man nursing a grievance. Sou Kishuku was Tamahome… Tamahome is your father."

"But… Dad's name is Taka. Sukunami Taka."

"Yes. That's also true."

"And his father is still alive!"

"In your world, possibly." Chichiri shrugged. "But your father was not always… a man of that world."

"In my… world?" Hikari stared. "Are you serious? Are you trying to tell me that all this is real and that I'm really in a completely different world somehow?"

Slowly Chichiri nodded.

"It's sort of unprecedented, you know." He added with a sigh. "Normally, it's only the Miko who can make the jump from your world to this. Your mother did it, years ago, when she became Suzaku no Miko. And Tamahome… Taka… he's done it, but he's one of us — he belongs here as much as he belongs with you and your family there. But then again, you… you are Miaka's eldest child, Hikari-chan? You are her firstborn baby?"

"Yes." Hikari looked wary. "Why? What does that have anything to do with anything?"

"Then you've been here before, too." Chichiri's face cleared, as if somehow he had confirmed something to himself. "And that's probably why you're able to be here now. It makes sense, you know. You aren't just a child of that world… you're a child of both, too."

"None of it makes any sense at all!" Hikari protested. "You, this place, Dad… what the hell are you talking about?"

"The only thing I can't fathom is why you're here, exactly." Chichiri pursed his lips. "By which I mean, in this stream of time. It seems odd — if fifteen years have passed in Miaka's world, but only six here… yet time moves more quickly in this world than it does in the other. I

remember that from the brief visit I made across the divide."

He glanced at her, cocking his head once more as he considered.

"Is this the power of the Shinzahou?" He murmured. "And if so, is the world you originally saw an omen — the reality of our future, and the world you travelled to when you were brought here by Suzaku's divine power?"

"Shin… za… hou?" Hikari shook her head as if to clear it. "Will you stop babbling nonsense at me? Just tell me the truth, will you? Tell me where I am and what's going on!"

"Well, I don't know all of those things, and others you may not believe, yet, if I try to explain." Chichiri said evenly. "But I will try… at least, so much as I can."

He sat back against the wall, offering her a smile.

"You're the same age your mother was the first time I met her." He reflected. "And you do resemble her. It's quite true. No wonder Tasuki was so startled… in some lights, I imagine, you could be her over again."

"You're babbling again." Hikari snapped. "You were going to get to the point?"

"This world has a legend, that when each of the four lands are in peril, a girl will come from another world." Chichiri said carefully. "This is Kounan, the Southern Kingdom, and the God who protects us is the phoenix known as Suzaku — but each of the other lands — Kutou to the East, Sairou to the West and Hokkan to the North — have Gods that protect them, too. The job of the girl — the Miko — is to raise the power of the God to defend the Kingdom from harm. In this task she has the help of seven warriors — the seven constellations belonging to that God in their human forms. This is Kounan, as I said, so our stars are those belonging to Suzaku."

He bent to roll up his trouser leg, and Hikari could see the red kanji for 'well' slashed across his kneecap.

"I'm Chichiri." He said with a shrug. "This mark is the mark of a Celestial Warrior — a protector of Suzaku no Miko and a defender of Kounan. Tasuki — Genrou of Reikaku-zan — is another Celestial Warrior, and your father, Tamahome — he was another. With your mother and four others, we combined our life forces and helped summon Suzaku… and Kounan, eventually, found peace."

"A Celestial…"

Hikari trailed off, and Chichiri chuckled.

“You don’t believe me.” He said frankly. “I didn’t think that you would. Coming from the other world as you have, and if they’ve told you nothing — I can imagine you’re a bit disorientated, you know. It must seem somewhat fantastic, to have even done something like this. Particularly if you’ve shifted through the timelines of this world, as I suspect you have. For some reason you drew yourself to us, and I’m wondering whether or not that’s because you’re Suzaku’s Shinzahou — or if it’s because of the unrest coming from the East.”

“Say I was to believe you?” Hikari said slowly. “What the hell’s a Shinzahou and why do you keep calling me it?”

“Ah.” Chichiri rubbed his chin. “That’s quite easy. When the Beast God is summoned, he leaves his power sealed in something chosen by the Miko, as a talisman or relic of the summoning ceremony. Normally it’s an object — jewellery or some such thing — but your mother was never quite an orthodox thinker.”

He grinned at her.

“She chose that *you* would be her Shinzahou.” He added. “She entrusted Suzaku’s power to you, when she sent you here to save Kounan six years ago.”

“Six years ago I was nowhere near here. I think I’d remember.”

“Well, yes, but I imagine it’s been closer to sixteen in your time. Considering the fact that you’re the age you are.” Chichiri said pensively. “Miaka sent you here with a girl named Mayo as guardian, before you were born. She trusted you to us, to raise Suzaku and save Kounan. And sealed within you is the power Suzaku left behind.”

“Aunt Mayo was here too?” Hikari was floored. “Yeesh, is this some big bad family secret or something?”

“I doubt it was a secret, as such.” Chichiri shook his head. “But it would have been difficult to explain, and I’m sure Miaka didn’t really consider the implications for you, as you grew up. She probably never imagined that one day you’d find yourself pulled into this world, too — I imagine she forgot all about the Shinzahou’s latent powers, because that’s the kind of girl she was. Kind, compassionate, but not always connecting the dots… that’s how I best remember Miaka. She had the greatest heart of anyone I’ve ever met, before or since. But I wouldn’t be surprised, if it hadn’t occured to her.”

Hikari stared at him uncertainly.

“You… almost do sound as if you know my mother.” She admitted unwillingly. Chichiri nodded.

“But if you do, then… then I have to believe the other stuff is real, too, don’t I?”

“Maybe. That’s up to you — I’m only telling you what I know. I won’t tell you what to believe.” Chichiri said lightly. “Faith is something individuals reach on their own. It can’t be forced on them.”

Hikari stared at him and he grinned ruefully, shaking his head.

“I’m sorry. Force of habit.” He admitted. “But it’s still true.”

“You’re not a bandit?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then what are you?”

“These days? I live in a village not far from here… I grow herbs to sell as treatments and salves, so I suppose, to a vague degree, I’ve become something of an apothecary.” Chichiri’s good eye twinkled, and Hikari frowned.

“An apothecary?”

“Well, not officially. I’m just utilising the knowledge I learnt from a man who was a truly gifted doctor. He would have wanted that — that’s all.”

“A doctor…” Hikari glanced at her hands. “I see.”

“I’m not sure what to define myself as, truly. For some time I lived as an itinerant monk, and as a man of Suzaku, it wouldn’t be wrong to call me a sorcerer — although saying that tends to scare people, you know? So I don’t do it often… words are such cumbersome things if they’re misunderstood, after all.”

He eyed her keenly.

“Your parents, do they look at the stars often?”

“All the time.” Hikari looked surprised. “Dad even has an old telescope, somewhere. It seemed so random, considering how tight he is with money and all. But yes. He and Mum — they look at the sky all the time, when it’s clear. Especially…”

She frowned, as memories flickered across her brain.

“When it’s Mother’s birthday, she always steps outside, even if it’s raining, to look up — like she’s talking to the sky.” She recalled. “It’s

weird, but then so is Mother, so I never really thought much of it. And Dad… when it's their wedding anniversary, Dad always makes a toast to absent friends. I thought he was just being general, but…"

She sighed, rubbing her temples.

"They have said things about friends who passed away." She admitted unwillingly. "And when I was small, Dad used to tell me stories — about a… a red bird that flew over the skies and saved everyone, and… and men who served this bird and were heroes to the people. He never gave them names, as such — but…"

She faltered, the pointed to Chichiri's still-exposed knee.

"He'd use Kanji." She owned. "He said it would help me to read… I'd forgotten, till now. But that… that was one of them. The well."

"I see." Comprehension flickered in the man's eye, and he nodded. "And… may I guess at the others?"

"I… suppose so."

"Willow. Star. Wings. Grief. Extended Net." Chichiri counted them off on his fingers. And then he grinned, an impish look touching his face.

"And the ogre." He added. "Oni."

Hikari bit her lip, and Chichiri nodded.

"I'm right."

"Yes." Hikari admitted. "Then… then it is true? This is… what those stories… were really about?"

"I guess he wanted you to know about us without having to explain that he came from another world originally." Chichiri shrugged. "And I'm sure it was the only way."

He smiled.

"The ogre — 'oni' — was the character Suzaku gave your father." He added. "It used to appear here, on his brow, when he fought to defend your mother's life."

He indicated on his forehead, and Hikari pursed her lips, remembering her father's occasional rubbing of his forehead during their argument. Slowly she nodded.

"I… I believe you." She admitted, burying her head in her hands. "I'm scared, but I… I believe you. I'm somehow in another world which my parents came to once and… and… and you're one of the

people from that world, but… but… how can I get back to my world? How do I do that?"

"I can't tell you what I don't know." Chichiri said sadly. "If it was just a case of you coming here — but it isn't. Somehow you've come back through time or space somehow, as well as just switching worlds. My best guess is that it's because you were Miaka's Shinzahou, and the Shinzahou is meant to have the protection of Suzaku's Shichi Seishi. That would be Tasuki and I, in this world, in the absence of the others — and they died in the service of the God. So…"

He sighed, glancing at her, then shaking his head.

"It's a big undertaking." He added regretfully. "To assume the care of a child belonging to such dear friends."

Hikari was startled by this, staring at the man anew, and realising, for the first time that beyond the scar was a kindly face and a warm, gentle demeanour. Despite her initial apprehension, she found that there was something likeable about this enigmatic character, and she offered him a faint smile.

"You care about my parents a lot, don't you?"

"Very much." Chichiri agreed. "Even though we can't cross paths, they're often in my thoughts."

He smiled.

"And that means Tasuki and I, we'll do what we can to help you get home." He added. "If we can work it out. Although, I am afraid your being here might be more than a coincidence. In which case, we may need your help, too."

"*My* help?"

"I suppose we'll have to wait and see." Chichiri shrugged, then held a hand out to her. "Will you come with me, Hikari-chan? I know Tasuki locked you in for your own protection — but I think it's better you come with me for now. Shishi aside, the mountain's no place for young girls, and my home is not far from here. My wife will be able to find you something better to wear than bandit attire, and I'm sure my own children wouldn't mind having a houseguest."

"You have a wife? And children?" Hikari asked the question before she realised the implication, and she blushed as Chichiri smiled ruefully, touching his damaged eye.

"Aidou sees past my appearance and always has." He said softly, and although there was no reproach in his tone, Hikari wished she

could take the words back. “Hopefully you will too, in time. When we know each other a little better.”

Despite herself, Hikari felt somewhat ashamed.

“I… I’m sorry.” She faltered. “I didn’t mean…”

Her companion’s grin widened.

“I know. Don’t take it to heart, you know. I’ve had this scar a long time — I’m used to how it makes people feel.”

“You… seem kind.” Hikari ventured. “I… is the mountain really dangerous? I mean, for me to be here?”

“All mountains that house bandits can be dangerous.” Chichiri said evenly. “And there’s no telling when rivals may attack. Will you come with me, Hikari-chan? I’ve nothing to prove my word to you that you’ll be safe, but at least in the village I can promise you a good meal and somewhere to sleep without needing to be locked away like this.”

“I… If I believe everything you’ve told me, then I… I believe you were my mother and father’s friend.” Hikari said unevenly. “So I… I will come with you. Only… what do I call you? You said your name was… Ri Hou Jun?”

“Chichiri seems as good a name as any, considering who you are.” Chichiri’s good eye twinkled. “Your mother and father knew me as Chichiri, after all.”

“Chichiri.” Hikari murmured. “All… all right. And about… protecting me? Do you really think you can… get me home?”

“I don’t know.” Chichiri admitted. “I have strong spiritual magic, you know, but I’ve not been able to penetrate Miaka’s world without some kind of medium before… and I really don’t understand everything about your coming here, either. Let’s go to the village, and we can talk about it further. If you can tell me everything you remember — from when you left that world till you met Shishi on the mountainside — then maybe I can work out what happened and find a way to get you back again. My only concern is that you didn’t come here by accident — that somehow, you’re meant to be here. In which case…”

“In which case?” Hikari looked apprehensive. Chichiri shrugged.

“It may not be possible to send you back right away.” He said evenly. “But let’s not worry too much about that right at the moment, you know. You must be tired, and confused… there’s plenty of time to reason it all out.”

“All… all right.” Hikari agreed hesitantly. She frowned. “Mum and Dad probably aren’t too worried about me, anyway. We… sort of had a fight, actually. They might be glad… that I’m not there for a while.”

Chichiri eyed her keenly, but said nothing, merely holding out his hand to her.

“Hold on tight.” He said instead. “It’s quicker this way.”

“What way?” Hikari began to ask, but as her fingers brushed his she found herself swept up in a haze of smoke and light, and she opened her mouth to scream. Before she could, however, she found herself making her third sudden landing of the day, as she fell onto the soft grass that fringed the village at the foot of Reikaku-zan.

As she struggled to her feet, she registered the fact that she had been in this place before, and her eyes widened as she took in her surroundings.

“But… this is…” She whispered. “This is the place I was… before. This is the deserted village… this is the place I came to when I first woke up! It’s here, Chichiri… it’s *this* place!”

“Wow, this place sure is old.”

As the two young soldiers entered the strange, air-filled underwater chamber, Maichu let out a low whistle, running his fingers against the azure stonework that ran in the pattern of a dragon all over the walls. Though neither man had brought anything with which to light their way, torches already glittered with blue in sconces carved in the shape of a dragon’s head, and Aoiketsu nodded his head, gazing at the designs with a flicker of awe in his soul.

“Seiryuu’s all right.” He murmured. “Do you think, then, that the old stories are true? About this being the way through which Seiryuu originally entered Kutou to give it divine blessing?”

“I have no idea.” Maichu pursed his lips, eying the chamber critically. “I wasn’t around when Yui-sama came or when the God was raised over the skies — but… I woulda thought he was bigger than this, Aoi. I mean, for all the pretty patterns… it’s not that big a chamber.”

“True.” Aoiketsu acknowledged. “Even so, though, someone must have put it here. And someone must have put a barrier around this chamber, right? Someone with spiritual power.”

“Maybe it was the Shougun.” Maichu suggested, and Aoiketsu

snorted.

“How old do you think Nakago was?” He demanded, incredulous. “He was only in his middle twenties when he was killed, Maichu. This chamber’s *way* older than that.”

“It doesn’t mean he didn’t put a barrier over it when he was alive, smartass.” Maichu retorted. Aoiketsu shrugged.

“Well, whatever did it, it’s still here now.” He murmured. “I don’t know… I get the feeling it’s been here a long time.”

“What do you suppose the Emperor will do with the scale, if we find it?” Maichu wondered. Aoiketsu spread his hands.

“Summon Seiryuu, maybe.” He reflected. “You and I both know he’s been trying to bring peace to Kutou almost as long as either of us have been alive. I guess that’s what it’s for. Something like that. Not that it’s really our business, in the end. I have faith in him, and I don’t question my Emperor’s decisions.”

“Me either.” Maichu said frankly. “I’m just curious.”

“Nosy, more like.” Aoiketsu snorted.

“I don’t see anything that looks like it might hide a holy scale though, Aoi.” Maichu frowned, leaning up against the wall as he surveyed the chamber. “It looks like… a big empty dragon-worshipping hole, to be honest with you. If the Divine Seiryuu really did leave a scale behind, wouldn’t it be pretty obvious where it was? I mean, it’s a part of the God himself, right? Surely there’d be an altar the size of the palace or something — not just an empty chamber like this.”

“Maybe this isn’t where the scale is.” Aoiketsu frowned, running his finger along the furthermost wall. “Maybe Kikei’s documents were wrong after all.”

“I’d like that.” Maichu snorted. “That fat, pompous old jerk is always full of himself and his opinions. It’d be nice to see him look like an idiot in front of Kintsusei-sama for once.”

Aoiketsu chuckled.

“You only say that because Kikei’s the one who reported you to Hyoushin-sama when you snuck out to meet that tavern girl three weeks ago.” He said playfully. “You were lucky you didn’t get whipped for it, too.”

“Hyoushin-sama thinks that he’s a pompous, fat jerk too. That’s

why I didn't." Maichu said absently. "But you're right. What kind of man snoops on soldiers living their life as men, huh? We're adults, ain't we? Tell me there's a single batallion in history who didn't take advantage of female favours when and if they could. What do we do this for anyway, Aoi-kun? Recognition, valour and the attentions of a pretty wench at the end of it!"

Aoiketsu snorted.

"You, maybe." He said frankly. "I'm going to be like Hyoushin-sama. A proper soldier… not a wastrel."

"I guess it makes sense you don't want a girl." Maichu reflected. "Bearing in mind you practically are one!"

"Maichu!"

"Well, you are." Maichu said, amused. "You know, come to think of it, if you braided up your hair like a brothel whore and painted your face, you'd probably be able to con them into taking you on as a courtesan. You're too pretty, you faint at the sight of blood — and you're not interested in women in the least. For all I know, you might secretly be coveting *me* — which is a disturbing thought, even if it is understandable…"

"Maichu, you are such a moron, you know that?" Aoiketsu shook his head impatiently. "I'm not a girl, and I don't like men. I just have more in my mind than the idea of working my way through all of Kutou's night women. That's all."

"Well, each to their own." Maichu shrugged. "And this place really is empty. Are we going to loiter down here or are we going up?"

"I don't know." Aoiketsu frowned. "Maichu, come look at this. It's worn and faded, but I think it's the same kanji as I saw before — the name Suiko, like the Commander said."

"Kanji?" Maichu crossed the chamber, peering at the battered rock as he ran his fingers carefully over the damaged section. "You think so? Maybe… but… what does that prove?"

"I wonder." Aoiketsu stood back, glancing at the wall afresh, and Maichu shot him an odd look.

"Aoi, you're being serious and strange again." He said bluntly. "Maybe you should give up the fighting lifestyle and become a scholar or a priest — you're far too interested in all this history factoid stuff."

"I just have a brain, and I use it." Was Aoiketsu's crushing response. "Shut up and help me, will you? I think… I think that this might be…

a door."

"A door?" Maichu's eyes widened with surprise. "How so?"

"I don't know." Aoiketsu admitted. "It's just that, the last time, those characters marked a door handle. And this one's been damaged, as if something has blasted its way through it. But even so, I think that it might be the same kind of… *ah*!"

He hastily withdrew his hand as his finger brushed against something sharp, and Maichu shot him a confused look.

"Same kind of ah?" He echoed. "What's that mean?"

"Nothing, you ape. I just caught my finger on something." Aoiketsu snapped, flexing the injured hand to make sure he had done no major damage, yet keeping his finger out of his line of sight. "Are you coming to help or not?"

"You're such a liability." Maichu sighed, but obediently came to his friend's side. "All right. So this is a door. What did you cut yourself on? Could it be a latch?"

"Don't know." Aoiketsu admitted. "I didn't see it. But it must be something in the stone. Can you see…?"

"Not really." Maichu admitted. "If there is something there, it's hidden by stone. Are you sure it wasn't just a sharp bit of rock or tile that you hit?"

"Pretty sure." Aoiketsu hesitated, then brought his hand up before his face, fighting the giddy sensation that threatened to wash over him as he caught sight of the blood pooling across his finger. He put it in his mouth, sucking it clean and then holding it out to his companion. "Does that look like a normal scratch to you?"

"Shit. No." Maichu grabbed his friend's wrist, eying the strange, star-shapped blemish with some surprise. "But…"

"I told you. It's a latch." Aoiketsu swallowed hard. "Maichu, find it, huh? I need to do something about this stupid finger."

"I should be calling you Aoi-kao, not Aoiketsu right now. You've gone a really funny colour." Maichu sent his friend an irritated look. "Can't you even stand a little prick on your finger, you big girl? Sheesh. Some use you are — don't you dare pass out on me! I don't want to have to drag you *and* the scale back to the surface."

"I… I'm all right." Aoiketsu said slowly. "As you said, it's only a little… a little blood. More important is finding out what cut me, and

whether it's a lock or handle of some sorts."

He swallowed again, forcing his nausea from his mind as he turned his attention back to the far wall. For a moment the two searched in silence, then, as Aoiketsu brought his injured hand cautiously up across the most damaged panel of stone, he felt something shudder beneath his touch.

"What did you do?" Maichu demanded, and Aoiketsu shrugged his shoulders.

"No idea." He admitted, biting his lip as he realised his injured finger had begun to bleed again, and that thick, red liquid had spilled across the splintered blue-white stone, giving it a strange, mottled look. "Hey, do you suppose… it's sacrilege… to bleed over a God's shrine?"

"You really look like you're going to be sick, you know."

"If you keep saying that I will be, and I'll do it all over you." Aoiketsu snapped, pulling his sash from his waist and wrapping it firmly around his fist. "There. I can't see it, it can't affect me. Stop baiting me… and pay attention. It's stopped moving."

"But you're right. It is a door." Maichu said softly. "Look. There's about an inch gap in the wall that wasn't there before."

"There is." Aoiketsu blinked, as he registered his friend's discovery. "So I guess… it was a latch, after all?"

"I don't know." Maichu looked apprehensive. "There's some writing here, brainiac… are you still fuzzy or are you up to reading ancient text?"

"You can read, you lazy oaf."

"Not this… it's all rubbed away in places and it's not the most clear cut scribing I've ever seen. It's all old and curly." Maichu shook his head. "But I'd like to know, before we do anything else, whether this place is likely to bring the Dragon's wrath down on our heads for intruding."

"I thought you weren't scared of anything, Maichu."

"That was before you bled all over his Shrine door." Maichu retorted. "Well?"

Aoiketsu sighed, resting his good hand against the wall to support his still shuddery body as he ran his gaze over the characters.

"*Beneath the land of the East, sealed by the Azure Dragon, sleeps Suiko,*

guardian of Kutou." He read softly. "Then there's something… I can't quite make it out… about stars. It might… I think… it says something about constellations of the Eastern sky. But one or two of the characters are too faint to make out. And then it says" *Only those chosen by Seiryuu may break the seal of the Scale*."

"Chosen by Seiryuu?" Maichu repeated. "Shit. What does that mean?"

"I guess it means one of the Seiryuu Shichi Seishi, or Seiryuu no Miko." Aoiketsu bit his lip.

"Which means, we're screwed."

"But the door *has* opened some. So we can try… and see if we can get further." Aoiketsu suggested, fumbling at his belt for the small pocket knife he always carried with him. "If I use this to jam it open as far as it already is, do you think we can pull it back enough to get inside? If the scale is sealed inside something, we might not be able to get it out. But if we can bring the receptacle to the surface…"

"Yeah, all right, but aren't all of Seiryuu's warriors dead?" Maichu protested, as he slipped his fingers into the gap, tugging on the heavy stone divide with all his strength. "Ouch, that's heavy! And Seiryuu no Miko went back to her world. How will they be able to open it at the palace?"

"That is a problem for the Emperor." Aoiketsu said simply. "We're only here to retrieve it, right? That's what Hyoushin-sama would say. And if we went back now, he'd just tell us to come down here and try."

"I know he would." Maichu admitted. "All right. So we'll do it your way. But take that stupid sash off your hand, Aoi. You can't tug with one hand and it's gonna take more than my strength. Surely it's done bleeding by now?"

"It has." Aoiketsu agreed. "Although what happened to you being the strong one, huh?"

"Pipe down and just help." Maichu instructed, and Aoiketsu grinned, but nodded his head, obediently sliding his own fingers into the gap above and below his friend's. As they pulled, little by little the door slid back until it was open enough for them to squeeze through, and as Maichu did so, he stopped dead, letting out an exclamation.

"Paydirt!"

"Paydirt?" Aoiketsu pushed through behind him, his eyes widening

as he realised that they had finally found the shrine of the scale. “Yeesh, no kidding. This has to be the place!”

Maichu nodded, and as Aoiketsu gazed around him, he felt almost compelled to bow and bring his hands together in prayer.

The room was not large — no bigger than three paces either way — and the furthest wall was engraved with the most vivid depiction of Seiryuu that either man had ever seen. The azure eyes glittered and glinted as if alive, as the coils of the sea-dragon’s immense, scaled body curled around a stone plinth cut into the rock of the wall. It was cased in something that looked like marble, but yet it shone with something that made it look like it had been carved from the sea itself, and in the centre of this was a jewelled case, studded with the most elegant and delicately carved sea gems.

“*That* must be where the scale is.”

Maichu darted forward eagerly to grab the casket, but as his fingers drew close, blue flame shot up around it, and he sprang back, cursing as he stared at it in disbelief.

“Shit. Now what?”

“Someone really didn’t want this falling into anyone’s hands.” Aoiketsu frowned, biting his lip. “First the underwater chamber, then that door, and now blue fire.”

“But if we can’t even take the casket…” Maichu trailed off. “What do we do now? You’re the brainiac, Aoi. You think of something.”

Aoiketsu was silent for a moment, glancing back at the half-open door, and then towards the shrine. He took a hesitant step forward, pausing, then reaching out cautiously towards the casket. Again, blue flame shot up around it, and he drew his hand back, glancing at it in pensive silence.

“I wonder if it hurts, to be burned by magic fire.” He murmured. “Because I can’t see us getting away with this, Maichu. If we go back, we’ll just have to explain to Hyoushin-sama why we found the scale but didn’t bring it to the surface with us. There must be a way… we’ve got this far.”

“The carving did say that it was only Seiryuu’s warriors who could enter here.” Maichu reminded him. Aoiketsu shook his head.

“We got this far.” He repeated. “We opened the door.”

“True.” Maichu’s eyes narrowed, and his gaze flitted back to the stone divide. “The door that wasn’t even visible till you bled all over

it, Aoi. How did you know it was there, anyway? And how did you open the door to the first chamber? Are you sure there's nothing you want to tell me?"

"Tell you?" Aoiketsu stared. "Like what?"

Maichu frowned, then grabbed his friend by the arms, glancing at them.

"What are you doing?"

"Well, it's pretty weird, don't you think?" Maichu demanded. "You bleed and start wailing like a sissy, and the door swings open."

"By about a half inch, Maichu. What does that prove?"

"I don't know." Maichu admitted. "But dammit, if I find you're a reborn Seiryuu Seishi or something, I swear…"

"A reborn…?" Aoiketsu's eyes widened, then he snorted. "You really are nuts. When I was conceived, all of the Seiryuu Seven were still alive, bonehead. How the hell could I be a reincarnated anything? I must've just fallen against the door funny when I was feeling dizzy, that's all. It's old and it slipped back on its runners. The lock was blitzed, remember. Something blasted it before we even got here."

He shook his head slowly, amused.

"We should get out of here soon. I think you're starting to go funny from breathing stale air." He added.

"You take the damn box then." Maichu folded his arms, sending his friend an impatient look. "I want to keep my fingers."

"Fine. I will. Then you have to stop calling me a girl, though, if I do." Aoiketsu said firmly. "If I can put my hand through the fire and take it, you have to quit it with the coward remarks. I ain't a coward. I can't help it that blood makes me feel like it does, okay? It's not because I'm a wimp… it's just like a handicap, like something I was born with."

"All right. It's a deal." Maichu nodded. "*If* you do it."

Aoiketsu narrowed his eyes, glancing at the glimmering jewel casket once more. Then he set his teeth, preparing himself for the shock of pain he felt sure would come as soon as he tried to penetrate the treasure's eerie barrier. As he pushed his injured hand forward, the flames flickered up once again, licking against his fingers and causing the wound to drip blood once more. Swallowing hard, Aoiketsu closed his eyes, resisting the urge to pull back as his skin

brushed against the chest for the first time. Faintly, he could hear the sizzle of his blood against the flames, and a bitter bile rose in his throat as he fought against the urge to be physically sick. His hand closed around the casket, and he gathered himself, pulling it back towards him. He heard Maichu gasp, as suddenly the hot sensation against his skin dissipated, and cautiously he opened his eyes, staring in disbelief as the blue flame faded and died, the long azure tongues dropping into strange, ghostly ash before disappearing completely into the blue of the stone plinth.

Triumph glittered in his eyes, and he turned to his friend, holding up his prize.

“There. Now who’s the wimp!” He demanded. Then he frowned, seeing the expression on Maichu’s face.

“What the hell’s eating you?” He demanded. Maichu swallowed hard, his eyes disbelieving and his face devoid of colour.

“Who *are* you?” He whispered. “Aoi, who the hell *are* you?”

“Your room-mate, you deranged goon. You really *are* running out of air.” Aoiketsu frowned. Maichu shook his head.

“No…” He breathed. “When you… the flames… when your blood touched them, they… flickered out. Like… your blood… put out the fire.”

“My *blood* did?” Aoiketsu felt faintly queasy at the thought, and he shook his head. “Don’t be stupid. I just pulled it free. That’s all.”

“And you just managed to open the door, too.” Maichu said softly. “I’m serious, Aoi. Who are you?”

Aoiketsu frowned.

“Kaiga Aoiketsu.” He said simply. “Who else would I be?”

Maichu eyed him hesitantly, but shook his head.

“We should go back to the Commander.” He said briefly. “Don’t drop that… after all this, I don’t want us to lose it. It had better be the damn scale now, I swear.”

“It is. *Suiko* is written on the casket in sea pearl.” Aoiketsu glanced at his prize. “If you’re so worried about it, though, Maichu, you take it.”

He held it out, but Maichu shook his head.

“It doesn’t like me.” He murmured. “It only likes you.”

“Stop being a freak, will you? You’re starting to spook me.” Aoiketsu frowned, and Maichu snorted.

“Not half as spooked as I am.” He admitted. “Come on. We got what we came for… let’s get out of this weird place before Seiryuu comes and curses us or something, all right?”

Before his friend could reply, the young soldier was gone, back towards the water and the underground cavern and Aoiketsu frowned, glancing at his prize once more, this time with a flicker of doubt.

“My blood put out the flame?” He murmured. “But… I felt the heat. It burned against my skin, just like it would’ve burned Maichu’s. And the door — I didn’t open the door with my bleeding — did I? Surely if I had… it wouldn’t have taken both of us pushing and pulling so hard to get it to part?”

He shrugged, sliding the casket into the folds of his clothing, securing it with his sash as he struck out for the surface. By the time he emerged, Maichu was already on the side, retrieving his armour, and as he clambered out, Hyoushin shot him an interested smile.

“You were successful, then?” He asked evenly. Aoiketsu nodded, fumbling in his pocket and holding out the casket. Hyoushin glanced at it, then nodded.

“Excellent.” He murmured, although his violet eyes betrayed no flicker of emotion. “Then we can return. Collect your armour, Aoiketsu. You will dry as we ride, in the warmth of the sun, and the sooner we return to the palace, the better.”

“Hyoushin-sama…?” Aoiketsu frowned, and the commander turned, casting him a questioning glance.

“Yes?”

“Is it possible… for someone’s blood… to open a door?”

“I have no knowledge of Seiryuu’s mystic ways. It is not an answer I can give.” Hyoushin said simply.

“Aoi’s blood unlocked this one, sir. I’m sure of it.” Maichu shivered, partly from cold and partly from the memory. “Hyoushin-sama, there isn’t any way he could be a… a reborn Seiryuu Seishi, is there? I mean, he says that he was conceived before they died, but… but Aoi was born *after* the war, wasn’t he? And… you were at the palace, when he was. Is he? Because there was a plaque that said that only Seiryuu’s chosen could unseal the vault, and…”

“You speak entirely too much, Maichu, and much of it is nonsense.”

Hyoushin said quietly. “Aoiketsu is quite correct. He was born barely three months after Kintsusei-sama was installed as Emperor of Kutou. It would be impossible for him to be the reincarnation of any such thing. You have too wild an imagination — you should learn to curb it, if you hope to make a good soldier.”

“Then how did he do it?” Maichu frowned. “I just don’t understand.”

“Pure chance, I expect.” Hyoushin sent Aoiketsu a lingering gaze, and a sudden chill went down the young soldier’s spine as he realised that it had been anything but chance. “You did say that it only opened the door a very slight distance?”

“Yes…”

“I don’t pretend to know anything about such powers, but surely one of Seiryuu’s chosen would have been able to open the divide fully?” Hyoushin reasoned. “Aoiketsu’s blood is inferior to any of Seiryuu’s Celestial Warriors — and Maichu, I will not hear you speak of such stupid things again.”

“Maybe it *was* just blood that broke the seal.” Maichu said doubtfully. “Blood of someone from Kutou. I guess that might be true… that if a proper Seishi had touched it, it would have slid back without a problem.”

“Then the matter is resolved.” Hyoushin said lightly. “Our horses are waiting, and the Emperor will be pleased.”

“Do you want *me* to… carry this back?” Aoiketsu asked hesitantly. Hyoushin glanced at him for a moment, and something glittered in his eyes as he nodded his head.

“Since you retrieved it, I think it would be fitting.” He agreed. “Credit where credit is due, Aoiketsu. You have done well.”

Again Aoiketsu had that faint sense of something else beyond his superior’s words, yet somehow he could not find the courage to ask the question. Instead he frowned, saluting as he nodded his head.

“Yes sir.” he said softly. “Understood.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Ten

"So, what exactly the hell is going on?"

As Shishi curled up in the branches of one of the sturdy mountain trees, she heard a voice from beneath her and she gripped the wood more tightly, thick red hair falling over her shoulders as she hunted for the speaker. As she caught sight of him, she grinned, adjusting her grasp so that she could leap gracefully down to the ground beside him.

"Jin!" She exclaimed. "When did you get back? I thought you and some of the others were doing surveillance for Kashira… did he give you a reprieve?"

"Nothing much to report. Everything's quiet." The young man who went by the name of 'Jin' cast her an amused look, reaching out to ruffle the wild red waves as he did so. "I come back here and find there's all kinds of hell let loose — and that you're in the middle of it, Shishi. I should've known you would be, all things considered — so you want to tell me what's been happening in the twenty four hours since I left the mountain?"

"You could ask Kashira." Shishi pulled away from his affectionate fingers, putting her hands on her hips. "I wish you'd stop doing that, Jin-kun. I'm not a little girl any more, you know — it was fine when we were kids but we're not kids now."

"Well, *I'm* not." Jin eyed her pensively. Then he relented, folding his arms across his chest. "All right. As for asking Kashira, he seems preoccupied with somethin' or other. I saw his friend from the village, too — Chichiri. He was here when I left yesterday an' he's here now — we ain't seen him up the slopes for months together an' then twice in two days? Somethin's afoot, that's for sure. There's some talk buzzing about a girl in the valley — that you brought someone back with you on the end of your sword."

"Not quite like that." Shishi sighed, dropping down onto the grass and pulling her companion down with her. "I mean, I did find a girl. And she's a weird brat. I thought she might be from the West — you should've seen how she was dressed. But Kashira thinks she's from the other world, and so does Okaasan. The Priestess's world. I don't

know… they're making a hell of a lot of fuss about her, either way. But if you want to see her, I guess you'll be disappointed. Kashira was goin' to hand her over to Chichiri to deal with. You know how he feels about girls on the mountain."

"*You're* a girl." Jin eyed her speculatively, and Shishi snorted.

"*I'm* different." She said frankly. "And so is Okaasan. We *belong* here. I meant other girls. And believe me, this one would probably sit and cry if anyone tried to attack her. Better off that Chichiri takes her –I don't want to play nanny to some other-world alien anyway."

"Anzu-sama's pretty ticked at you, huh?" Jin sent her a keen look, and Shishi flushed.

"What makes you say that?" She demanded, and Jin laughed.

"Because Aniki had to rescue you from Kaou-zan-climbin' only a short time ago, an' you're meant to be stayin' put on the mountain…?" He suggested. "You broke bounds an' got caught, that's all… I know you, Shishi — an' I know that expression. It's the expression of a caged lion cub, that's what it is. You're pissed because this brat came an' because of bringin' her back to the mountain, you got into trouble for sneakin' out."

"Well, if I had left her there, someone woulda killed her, or worse." Shishi rested her chin in her hands. "It woulda been all right, if it was just Kashira I had to answer to. But Okaasama's such a pain, sometimes. I'm not a baby any more, an' I hate when she treats me like one in front of Aniue an' others. Especially in front of this Hikari brat. It sucks."

"Hikari, huh?" Jin frowned. "That's the girl's name? Sounds pretty ordinary to me."

"Yeah, well, you didn't *see* her." Shishi snapped. "Trust me, Jin. She's a freak of nature."

"All right, I'll take your word for it." Jin grinned, eying her with some amusement. "Do you think she's another Miko, then? A Priestess of Suzaku, like the one Kashira fought with to save Kounan?"

"Dunno, and don't care." Shishi shrugged her shoulders. "From what P… Kashira said, it sounded more to me like the brat was some spawn of the Miko's, actually. Maybe she's come to pay her respects to Reikaku-zan — but seriously, Jin, it ain't my problem now. She'll be gone with Chichiri an' he can cast his spells around her an' send her back where she came from. End of excitement. It's really not that big a deal."

Jin looked thoughtful for a moment, digesting this. At seventeen, the three year gap between him and his young friend meant that sometimes he was able to grasp the greater significance in things, and for a while there was silence between them. Then he cast her a sidelong glance.

"What if it isn't that simple?" He asked at length. "Listen. I heard Kashira and Aniki talkin' the other day. I was waitin' to see Kashira 'bout this trip we were takin', so it wasn't like I was on purpose overhearin'. But Kashira's voice carries an' I heard him talkin' pretty clearly. It was about the mark on his arm, Shishi. From how he was speakin', sounded to me like Suzaku was gonna put in a return appearance. Then this girl suddenly shows up from the other world? Seems mighty convenient to be a coincidence, dontcha think?"

"Mark? Of Suzaku?" Shishi looked startled. "Are you playin' with me?"

"Nope." Jin shrugged. "An' I don't know as you've noticed, Shi-chan, but Kashira's taken to wrapping his arm up these last few weeks. Why else, except to hide his character from bein' seen? Tisn't like he's wounded or nothing."

"I *hadn't* noticed." Shishi admitted, resting her chin in her hands as she contemplated this. "Really?"

"Yep." Jin inclined his head. "You need to pay better attention, you know — if you're ever goin' to graduate from cub to full blown mountain lion, you gotta watch out for the clues along the way."

"I suppose." Shishi looked uncharacteristically thoughtful. "But I guess I hadn't thought about it. I mean, Kashira's always had that, on his arm. And even if it does appear — so what? It always does when he's fighting. What's so significant about it now?"

"Don't know." Jin admitted. "But think about it. Why else would Chichiri suddenly appear on the mountain after two months or more away? Somethin's afoot, Shishi. That girl, everything. Somethin' is. Aniki said as I came back that Kashira'd been to see Reizeitei-sama this morning. When was the last time he did that, huh?"

"The Emperor…" Shishi frowned. "Six… six years ago, I guess."

"Right. When Reikaku-zan almost disappeared into obscurity." Jin nodded his head. "You still think there's nothin' to it? I'd be surprised if that were true."

"You have a point." Shishi sighed, getting to her feet. "All right. Jin, come with me. I want to speak to Kashira myself… I want to

know what's goin' on. You come too, huh? If we both ask him, maybe he'll tell us somethin' about all of this."

"Are you sure?" Jin looked doubtful, and Shishi nodded her head.

"Okaasan said I wasn't to leave the mountain. Talkin' to Kashira ain't leavin' the mountain." She said frankly. "Will you get off your backside already an' come with me?"

"All right, already, hold your horses." Jin sighed, tut-tutting under his breath as he hauled himself to his feet. "Some of us have been out an' about workin' for our food this morning, you know — not all of us can spend our lives playin' around trees."

"I went with Aniue to get Chichiri." Shishi objected. "I'm not a baby, Jin. Stop treating me like I am."

"What else are big brothers meant to do, huh?"

"Yeah, except you ain't my brother, smart alec."

"Sure, but it doesn't seem to matter in this joint." Jin eyed her affectionately. "Cubs all grow up together, an' all of that."

"Right. Grow up. Which is what I've done, in case you ain't noticed."

"You're still a long way from wielding Kashira's tessen, you know." Jin warned her. Shishi snorted.

"So what? Don't need to, while Kashira and Aniue are here." She said pragmatically. "One day I will, but not yet. Right now I'm jus' going to be a damn fine bandit. I'll leave the tessen for the future."

She grabbed her companion by the arm, pulling him in the direction of the main bandit headquarters, but as they did so, Jin let out an exclamation, gesturing up ahead.

"Looks like you ain't got far to walk, lion cub. Kashira's out for a stroll himself, this evening. Guess he's goin' stargazin' again, or somethin'."

"Stargazin'…" Shishi frowned, shaking her head. "Well, if he's here, then that's all right. Like you said — it's less far to walk. Kashira!"

And she raised her voice, causing the redhaired bandit to turn, casting her a look of surprise.

"Shishi… Jin? What the hell's eatin' the pair o' you? You're screamin' so loud they'll hear you in Souun!"

"Sorry." Shishi did not look in the least bit perturbed, as she

hurried up to him, raising eager bronze eyes to his own more clouded ones. “Kashira-sama, I want to talk to you. So does Jin. We both do. About the girl… the Hikari girl, and her bein’ on the mountain.”

“Hikari’s gone with Chichiri, now.” Genrou said evenly. “To the village. An’ you ain’t goin’ after them, Shishi — cos your Ma’ll have words to say if you do.”

“I don’t want to. I don’t like her.” Shishi pulled a face. “But it’s not that. Is she really from the other world, Kashira? From… the Miko’s world?”

“Looks that way.” Genrou leant up against the trunk of a nearby tree, folding his arms across his chest and as he did so, Shishi gasped, registering the white fabric that was wound around his right arm. With a frown she reached out a finger to touch it, then raised her gaze to the leader’s.

“Papa, why do you have your arm all wrapped up like that?” She asked softly, and at the sound of the affectionate nickname, Genrou started, then offered her a wolfish grin.

“Papa, huh?” He murmured. “What happened to ‘I’ll earn my place as a bandit an’ call you Kashira, like everyone else’?”

“I guess… I didn’t think it mattered, just in front of Jin an’ you.” Shishi blushed, looking discomfited. “But… it’s not… why is your arm bound? Jin said it was… is it because… of Suzaku’s mark?”

“Hrm.” Genrou eyed her keenly, then he shrugged his shoulders. “So if you’ve that figured out, kid, why ask me the question?”

“Do you think the girl is another Miko, Kashira?” Jin asked hesitantly. “One or two of the guys, they were talking, and it sounded like they thought so.”

“Hikari ain’t a Miko, far as I know.” Genrou frowned. “To be honest, I ain’t got a clue what is going on. But Chichiri says it’s somethin’ to do with what happened six years ago. More’n that, I can’t tell you. He’s got her now, anyhow. Guess he’ll find out whatever it is. As far as we’re concerned, there ain’t nothin’ more for Reikaku-zan to do. Least, not right now.”

“Are you leaving the mountain again, Papa?” Shishi asked quietly, and Genrou eyed her keenly.

“Do you have a problem with it, if I do?” He asked evenly. Shishi hesitated, then she shrugged.

“Last time when you did, Okaasan was worried.” She said simply.

“She said that, whenever you fight for Suzaku as Tasuki, you… put yourself in danger. An’ she worried you weren’t coming home again. That’s all.”

“Ah.” Genrou rubbed his chin, then offered her another wolfish smile. “Do you really think it’s easy as all that to kill the Kashira of Reikaku-zan, Shishi? What kind of man do you think I am, huh? If we go wanderin’ again, Chichiri an’ me, we’ll come back. Ask Kouji — I’m a homing wolf. No matter where I go, I always come back to the mountain. An’ besides, if I did go, Kouji’d take care of things here. It’d be fine. You’ll see.”

“If you do go, Papa, I want to come with you.” Shishi said determinedly. Genrou snorted.

“You think your Ma’d ever allow that? Don’t be stupid.” He said categorically. “You’re makin’ a good bandit, Shishi, an’ you’ll be a strong fighter when you’re fully grown. Right now, you’re still a cub. Kouji warned me that you’d be like this — the older you got, the more you’d wanna be like your old man an’ I guess I can’t blame you… it’s the way you’ve grown up, fendin’ for yourself on the mountain like you have. But listen. Suzaku’s work ain’t like bandit raidin’. I saw four close friends killed doin’ the God’s biddin’…and one o’ them was just a kid, like you. Your Ma’d never forgive me if somethin’ happened to you, too.”

“I’m not weak.” Shishi said stubbornly. “I could come.”

“Right now, I ain’t going anywhere, so it’s moot.” Was Genrou’s unsympathetic answer. “An’ listen, girl. You wanna be Kashira someday, I know you do. An’ I know you’re determined to earn it, not do it because you’re my brat an’ everyone knows it. That impresses me — that you’ll fight for it, an’ to be respected on this mountain you need to fight, for sure. But there ain’t no use in bein’ dead, that’s all. Take it from someone who’s seen all sides o’ death — the only time you really have to make your own is while you are alive an’ that’s a fact. There ain’t no hurry for you to prove yourself.”

He winked.

“I ain’t goin’ to die jus’ yet, an’ besides, if anythin’ happened to me, this is Kouji’s perch. You know that.”

“Papa…”

“Papa?”

“Kashira.” Shishi flushed once more. “All right. I get it. But really… if you did leave the mountain… it’s a bandit’s job to defend the

Kashira, an' support him, right? Fourteen isn't a baby, an' I'll be fifteen when the summer hits its peak. Jin was fifteen when you first let him go raidin' with the men an' not have to be shadowed… I ain't just a kid any more."

"You're a girl, Shishi."

"So what?!" Shishi protested. "That doesn't mean anything! I'm as good as any of the others — better'n some! I can beat most of the boys in a swordfight an' I'm stronger, too… why should it matter if I'm a girl?"

"To me, kid, it doesn't matter at all." Genrou said simply. "To Kouji, neither. An' I'm sure Jin sees you the same way. But to an enemy, you're still a girl. An' there are a lot of enemies out there. You'll have to work twice as hard, if you really want to prove yourself. Not to me, but to anyone you expect to take you seriously."

Shishi was silent for a moment. Then she raised resolute bronze eyes to her father's.

"I'm going to be the kind of bandit you are." She said firmly. "An' to do that, I need to see the kinds of things you do. I've decided, Kashira. If I always stay here, and I'm always protected, I'll never be strong enough to really fight and hold the tessen, will I? So if you do leave here, I want to come with you. I'll take care of myself — I won't be a burden. But if you do… please. I want to come. I want to see… what it's really like to fight for Kounan."

"You sound like your damn mother. An' she says you take after me." Genrou rubbed his temples. "Take it up wi' her, why don't you? I've learnt enough over the years not to meddle in the affairs of women unless I damn well have to."

"Was that a yes?" Shishi's eyes lit up with hope, and Genrou snorted.

"You're just as bad as Anzu, always readin' things into what people say." He said ruefully. "No, it was an 'ask your mother'. An' that's an end to it. Right now, there's no leavin' the mountain, anyway. So like I said, it's moot."

"Will Chichiri-san send the girl back to her own world, then?" Jin asked quietly. Genrou shrugged, glancing up at the darkening sky.

"Probably, if he can." He admitted. "An' if any more than that comes of it, I guess he'll let us know. Right now there's bandit business to take care of, an' we ain't doin' that, standing around out here like lemons. Shishi, you have chores. Jin, you too. An' I have

today's takin's to go over with a fine tooth comb. Get to it, the both o' you, an' stop wasting time!"

"This place?"

As they stood at the edge of the village, Chichiri cast his young companion a puzzled look, retrieving his *kasa* as he returned it to it's travelling position. "I don't understand what you mean. Kounan in general? Or…?"

"No. I… I don't know." Hikari bit her lip, her gaze straying to the peaks in the distance. She gestured.

"That's… Reikaku-zan? Where we came from?"

"Yes." Chichiri agreed.

"And you did some kind of magic…" Hikari faltered, then she shook her head.

"I think I did, too." She whispered. "Just like you just did. I… I was here, and then… I was… n't. But it didn't… look like this. It was… different. Like… a desert."

"A desert, huh?" Chichiri pursed his lips. "You said that before. A wasteland. But I don't quite understand what you mean, you know."

"Nor do I." Hikari shivered, suddenly feeling cold. "But… maybe I'm wrong. It just… the landscape looks… like it's the same. Even though… it's alive now. It wasn't before."

Chichiri's good eye narrowed as he digested her words, but he made no remark. Instead he gestured in the direction of the settlement.

"My home is just ahead, you know." He said gently. "Aidou will no doubt be more than willing to feed you, and we'll talk about this some more. All right?"

"Y… Yes." Hikari nodded, inwardly knowing that the frightening sight she had seen upon her arrival to Kounan was something she never wanted to try and describe to anyone. "All right."

They walked on in silence for a few moments, each lost in their own thoughts, and as Hikari gazed down at the ground, she found herself doubting her own convictions. Grass and small, dainty flowers sprung up in random, sporadic clusters, giving the pathway a sense of vibrancy and life as it wound its way through the centre of the thriving settlement, and as they reached Chichiri's home, she raised

her gaze, half-ready to say she'd made a mistake and that wherever she'd arrived at originally, it hadn't been the Eastern Village.

But, as her gaze rested on the property before her, all colour drained from her features, and she glanced at Chichiri in horror, shaking her head.

"No." She whispered. "Not here… I can't… go in here. I *won't*!"

"Hikari?" Chichiri shot her a confused look. "What's the matter?"

Hikari took a step or two backwards, a sick sense of uncertainty winding its way around her heart.

"I can't." She murmured. "I don't want to see… not again."

"See what?" Chichiri was now completely bemused, and he held out his hand to her. "I realise that buildings in your world are different, you know — but its quite safe. I promise."

Hikari gazed at him, swallowing hard, but before she could speak again, the door swung back and with an excited exclamation, something small and blue flung itself on Chichiri.

"*Papa*!"

"Mei-chan — I thought you were helping your mother dry herbs?" Chichiri laughed, disentangling what Hikari now realised was a young girl, robed in a simple blue gown covered by a green-patched white work apron, her thick red hair braided back from her face in an unfamiliar style. She did not appear to be more than five or six at first glance, and as Hikari gazed at her, she had a sudden, appalling sense that she had seen this girl before.

She swallowed again, not liking the direction in which her thoughts were heading.

"Who are you?" The voice jerked her back to herself, and she started, glancing down at the eager young face as she struggled to muster a smile. There was no trace of doubt or hesitation in the child's dark red eyes, as she held out her hands in greeting. "Are you a friend of Papa's? Have you come for a visit? I'm Meikyo an' I'm eight years old — how old are you? Are you older than Shishi? You look like you are… are you going to stay with us?"

"Meikyo…" Something about that name jarred Hikari's memory and her eyes widened. "Oh! Shishi? Shishi mentioned you, when we were walking up the mountain!"

"Shishi's my cousin." Meikyo dimpled. "What's your name? And

how old *are* you? It's not rude to ask that, is it? I mean, it's not like you're grown up — it's okay, right?"

"H… Hikari." Hikari responded. "And I… I don't mind. I don't know how old Shishi is but I… I'm fifteen."

Meikyo's smile widened.

"Papa, is Hikari-neechan going to stay with us?" She asked, turning back to her father. "Is she? Is that why you went to the mountain to see Uncle Wolf?"

"*Neechan*?" Hikari blinked.

"Mei-chan, just take a breath and calm down." Chichiri chuckled, bending to pat the child's head. "You're confusing her. Hikari's come from a long way away. She's the daughter of two very, very good friends of mine, you know, and that's why she's come to see us. Will you run inside and tell your mother that I'm back? And that I've brought company?"

"Yes, Papa." Meikyo nodded her head. She cast Hikari another wide, disarming smile. "Pleased to meet you, Hikari-neechan!"

With that she turned on her heel, hurrying back into the house, and Chichiri sent the bewildered Hikari a rueful look.

"I'm sorry." He said pensively. "Meikyo is… all the world is her friend, I'm afraid."

"No she… she's cute." Hikari managed a smile.

"I hope you don't mind being Neechan while you're here." Chichiri added, taking her by the arm and leading her towards the house. "I have one son and one daughter, four years apart, and they're quite close, as siblings go. But Mei-chan's always wanted to have a big sister… and Shishi's never quite fit the bill. She's so much the bandit, after all, growing up on the mountain like she has. So… I'm afraid you might be it, you know. At least, while you're here. I don't suppose it will be long, if I can figure out how you got here, and how to send you back."

Hikari did not reply, gazing around the small living area with a growing sense of horror as she registered the same patterned cape as she had seen on her initial appearance in the deserted village.

"Chichiri…?" She murmured.

"Yes?"

"Is… is there another room beyond this? Through that way… a

small room — a sleeping chamber?" Hikari turned a troubled gaze on her guide, whose eyes widened with surprise.

"Yes." He agreed. "How could you know that?"

"I told you. I was here before." Hikari swallowed hard, her legs suddenly feeling weak. "I don't understand… I don't know how or why. But I was… I was here before. Only… everything… everything was… dead. Abandoned. Empty. Everything."

Chichiri frowned, gesturing for her to sit down as he settled himself on the floor, crossing his legs absently as if he were a monk about to embark on prayer, and Hikari eyed him in trepidation as she heard the sound of voices from the rooms beyond.

"I think you need to be more clear about what you mean, Hikari-chan." He spoke softly, and there was a certain seriousness to his tone as he struggled to piece together what she was saying. "When you arrived in this world, it was a desert. Correct?"

"Yes."

"But it was still this place?"

"Y… yes." Hikari nodded. "I… I'm quite sure about that."

"So when you entered this world, you entered at a point that ran current with your own world." Chichiri's brows knitted together. "I'd already assumed that. That the world you came into was in fact the future of this one — otherwise the time disparity between your age and the fact those events here happened only six years ago… it's the only explanation."

"I don't know what you mean." Hikari admitted, and Chichiri held up his hand.

"It doesn't matter." He said, with a flick of his fingers. "Tell me what happened, when you were in this desert."

"I… I looked for people. I thought it was a dream, but I couldn't wake up." Hikari said unsteadily. "I walked… through the village. I came here. To this house. I… I got scared by something I saw… and I… I panicked. Next thing I knew there was this red light and I woke up in the valley, with Shishi and her stupid sword."

Chichiri's lips thinned.

"A *red* light?"

"Yes. Just like the one I saw when I was in the library. When I was with that stupid book, in the restricted area."

“A book.” Chichiri tapped his fingers against his leg. “Miaka used to use a book as a medium between our worlds. I imagine that this is the same one.”

“I don’t know anything about that. I didn’t know anything about this world till now.” Hikari eyed him helplessly, inwardly hoping he would not voice the question that deep down she knew he would ask.

At length, it came.

“Hikari-chan, when you were in this world — in this deserted world — what was it that frightened you so much?” Chichiri asked softly. “It must have been your dormant Shinzahou power that brought you here, to us — to a place where there were Suzaku Seishi to protect you. Either that, or Suzaku himself, one or the other. But what was it that triggered such a reaction… that made you so terrified you managed to shift through time?”

Hikari swallowed hard, biting on her lip hard enough to taste blood.

“Children.” She whispered. “In that room. Sleeping. And a woman… a woman who was nearby.”

“I don’t…”

“They were sleeping forever, Chichiri.” Pain flickered in Hikari’s eyes as she blurted out the truth. “They were skeletons. They were… they were all dead.”

Chapter 12

Chapter Eleven

"So this box contains the holy scale of the Divine Seiryuu?"

As Aoiketsu set the casket down before the golden statue of the Azure Dragon, Kintsusei got to his feet, approaching it with a mixture of reverence and intrigue as he bowed his head in deference to the God's status. "And it was where Kikei's documents indicated — beneath the caves where we sheltered years ago, Hyoushin?"

"Yes, my Lord. As Kikei correctly surmised, the shrine was deep beneath the surface." Hyoushin inclined his head slightly, and Kintsusei pursed his lips, reaching down to touch the jewelled surface tentatively.

"Such beauty." He whispered. "I trust that you encountered no great difficulty in retrieving it?"

"Aoiketsu and Maichu were more than equal to the task, my Lord." Hyoushin said evenly, and the two young soldiers exchanged looks, faint flickers of pride appearing on their faces as the Emperor ran his gaze over them each in turn.

"Good work, both of you." He murmured. "You have done extremely well, and I am pleased."

"We're not quite sure how to open the casket, however, Kintsusei-sama." Hyoushin continued quietly. "Perhaps Lord Kikei might have an idea? Apparently the artefact was sealed within the shrine by powerful magic, and my men have some… concerns that they may not be equal to this task. After all, they are not chosen of Seiryuu — whatever in fact that really means."

"Hyoushin…" Kintsusei eyed his friend for a moment, then his lips twitched into a rueful smile as he registered the faint irony in the amethyst gaze. "You do like to push me, when it comes to the subject of my faith. I wouldn't expect any less of the Dragon — to protect his artefact against thieves and robbers, I have no doubt he would design any number of trials to keep such people at bay. Your men should be doubly proud of their achievement, if this is the case. I trust neither they nor you were hurt in the process of locating it?"

"No, sir." Hyoushin shook his head. "Nothing more than a bare

scratch here or there."

"Good." Kintsusei looked glad. "In which case, I'll bow to your suggestion and summon Kikei from his quarters to raise any suggestions of his own."

His gaze flickered to Maichu, who was alert in an instant at the Emperor's attention, and Kintsusei gestured in his direction.

"Run at once to the Priest's study, and tell him his Emperor requires his presence at the Shrine of Seiryuu immediately." He said softly. "Tell him it is of the utmost importance that he attend me right away."

"Yes, Kintsusei-sama." Maichu bowed his head, then withdrew from the shrine chamber, the door sliding shut behind him with a faint creak.

Once he was gone, Hyoushin pursed his lips, casting Aoiketsu a pensive glance.

"My Lord, do you believe Lord Kikei's spells will be able to release the lock on the casket?" He asked softly.

"You ask in such a way that makes me think you believe they won't." Kintsusei said wryly. "Have a little faith, Hyoushin… he is, after all, a Priest of Seiryuu."

"Indeed." Hyoushin inclined his head. "But I wonder if such things are important, when it comes to a holy relic. Forgive my ignorance on this subject, but surely the incantations of a mere priest will not be enough to break a divine seal? If, indeed, that is what holds the casket closed. Both Aoiketsu and Maichu spoke of barriers and blue fire when they came to take the case from it's resting place. I only wonder if such defence measures spread beyond the underground caves… whether harm will befall anyone who tries to open the box."

He smiled slightly.

"We would not want to see harm come to Lord Kikei, now would we?"

"Hyoushin." Kintsusei pursed his lips reprovingly, but his companion seemed unperturbed.

"As I said, I am ignorant of such things, being born a Meihi as I am." He said evenly. "Aoiketsu, perhaps you might explain to your Emperor more clearly what you encountered beneath the surface? I'm sure your account will be clearer than any explanation I can give."

“Yes, sir.” Aoiketsu cast his superior a surprised glance, then nodded his head. “It’s as Hyoushin-sama says, Heika. The casket was sealed behind a stone wall and guarded by a barrier of blue fire. Maybe the God put it there when he left the scale behind.”

“I see.” Kintsusei looked thoughtful. “But such seals must have had a weakness, if you and your comrade were able to pass through them without taking physical harm?”

“It seems Aoiketsu’s blood had an impact on releasing the door’s lock.” Hyoushin said off-handedly, and Kintsusei’s eyes widened as he gazed at the young soldier anew. Despite himself, Aoiketsu felt uncomfortable.

“I didn’t mean to cut myself on it, or bleed over the shrine door.” He said hastily. “It wasn’t… I wasn’t trying to offend Seiryuu… I just… it was an accident. The door was all splintered where the seal was, and…”

He trailed off, and Kintsusei rubbed his chin.

“*Your* blood, Aoiketsu?” He murmured. “And the blue flame? This too?”

“It would seem so, Lord Kintsusei.” Hyoushin answered this time. “It appears the boy had a charmed passage beneath the surface. Perhaps at long last all his training has paid off.”

“I see.” Kintsusei’s eyes narrowed, and he rested a hand on Aoiketsu’s confused shoulders. “Did you attempt to open the casket, Aoiketsu?”

“No, Sire.” Aoiketsu shook his head hurriedly. “Such a thing would have been sacrilege — I just brought it back here to you on Hyoushin-sama’s command.”

Kintsusei eyed him keenly, then he gestured to the sealed casket.

“Would you try, please?” He asked gently. Aoiketsu looked confused.

“Sire?”

“Do not question your Emperor’s requests, Aoiketsu.” Hyoushin said softly. “It might be perceived as insolence.”

“I… I… no, sir. Yes sir. I understand.” Aoiketsu bowed his head, obediently dropping down beside the jewelled casket and reaching out a hesitant hand to pick it up. “I’m just not sure that I’ll be able to open it. I mean, I’m just a soldier — I’m certainly not anyone to Seiryuu.”

“Nonetheless, if you would try, boy.” Kintsusei said quietly. “Humour your King and indulge his whims.”

Aoiketsu frowned, running his fingers over the uneven surface of the gem-studded blue box. As he did so, his sharp eyes spotted a groove in the metal and he bit his lip, squinting at it more closely.

“I believe there’s some kind of fastening here.” He admitted. “But I am unsure how to open it. We have no key.”

“Perhaps you could try the same key as the one you used underground, Aoiketsu?” Hyoushin suggested lightly. Aoiketsu stared at his Commander in dismay.

“You mean… bleed on it?”

“That seemed to be effective before.”

“But… over something so sacred?”

“Do it, Aoiketsu.” Kintsusei said softly. “You have it on Imperial command… I wish to see that all avenues are explored… if your blood was truly able to break the seal, it may be that the casket will recognise you from before, and allow you entrance. Your heart is pure, after all. Your intentions and loyalty without question. Such a man Seiryuu must be sure to grant favour to — don’t you think so?”

“Such a man…” Aoiketsu stared for a moment, then his face cleared. “You mean that *that’s* why my blood broke the seal? Because I’m loyal to Kutou and seek to help my Emperor bring it peace?”

“Such a thing had occured to me.” Kintsusei agreed. “You are young, and your heart is resolute. Hyoushin has said to me many times how he has faith in your loyalty to me and to Kutou. If anyone would be considered worthy by Seiryuu it would be one such as you… one whose hands are unstained by others’ blood, and whose heart beats only for peace within your homeland.”

“I see.” Comprehension flickered in Aoiketsu’s unusual eyes and he nodded his head. “Then I’ll do as you command, Heika. If you think that’s what it was, in the underground chamber… that makes some sense, now. I mean, it’s true I’ve never taken another’s life in battle, and I do believe in Kutou’s future security.”

“And you do not seek the power of the scale for selfish ends.” Hyoushin added with a faint, strange smile, even as the young soldier drew his knife from his belt, glancing at his hand and then bringing the blade cleanly down across the tip of his index finger, where the wound he had sustained earlier on had begun to heal over. Fresh

blood pulsed from the blemish, and he frowned, clearly fighting his own instinctive reaction to the shock of pain and blood as he pressed the finger hard against the lock of the casket, raising his gaze to meet his Emperor's.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, just as Aoiketsu was sure he would either pass out or throw up in front of both his King and the God's image, there was a glitter of faint blue light from the casket in his hand, and he gasped, almost dropping it as suddenly it seemed hot beneath his touch. Hurriedly he set it down again before Seiryuu's statue, half-wondering if he had imagined a strange, answering glitter in the azure eyes of the motionless gold dragon that arched over their heads.

As the blue light faded, there was a click, and the box lid jerked open.

Kintsusei's eyes widened, and he and Hyoushin exchanged glances, the latter's eyes flickering with something which seemed to answer an unspoken question. Kintsusei smiled, nodding his head.

"Well. It seems the blood of an innocent is the key to the lock after all." He said quietly, as Aoiketsu put his finger in his mouth, sucking on it and hoping that he would not disgrace himself in front of his Emperor. "So much the good. I am pleased, Aoiketsu… to see that Hyoushin and my faith in you as a loyal subject of Kutou is not misplaced."

"I am here to act as my Emperor commands." Aoiketsu bowed his head.

"Kintsusei-sama?" At that moment the door swung back to reveal the short, fussy priest, robes flapping as he made his way imperiously through the centre of the chamber, Maichu in tow. As he passed, Maichu met his friend's gaze, pulling a covert face behind the priest's back, and a smile twitched at Aoiketsu's lips, making him forget his spell of dizziness as he absorbed his fellow soldier's humour. Kikei did not apparently notice, however, his greedy eyes already fixed on the blue casket that lay before the statue.

"So it is true. You *do* have the scale of the Divine Seiryuu safe within the shrine." he whispered. "Such a precious artefact… Hyoushin has served you well this time, my Lord."

"As ever he does." Kintsusei shot Hyoushin a smile, and the pale-skinned tribesman bowed his head in acknowledgement, his thick silver hair falling over his shoulder as he did so.

“Lord Kikei, now that the scale is retrieved, how can we use it to strengthen Kutou’s defences?” He asked softly. “I believe that was the reason for going, after all — the ongoing civil strife within our borders that the Emperor seeks to quell once and for all. Do you have some idea of our next course of action? I am an ignorant in the ways of Seiryuu — but I look to you for guidance in this matter, as ever.”

Kikei’s beady eyes narrowed as he scooped up the casket, glancing at it, then up at his Emperor.

“It’s unlocked.”

“Yes. We managed to get that far.” Kintsusei nodded his head. “But noone has tried to remove the contents — or even really examined them. After all, this is your area of expertise, as Priest of Seiryuu’s Shrine. Hyoushin is right — your opinion would be most helpful.”

Kikei pursed his lips, opening the box as a flare of blue light illuminated the room momentarily, dazzling the surrounding men as it seemed to reach every corner. Then, as soon as it had come, it was gone, and the priest narrowed his eyes once more.

“The scale is intact, and does not appear to bear many scars from its appropriation by Tenkou. This is good.” He murmured. “I can feel its spiritual magic pulsing through the metal of this case. But in order to revive the power of Suiko, we must trace the Shinzahou left by Lady Yui when she summoned the Beast God. The scale alone is not enough… we lack an other-world Priestess, and the scale’s own power has been somewhat drained by Tenkou’s scandalous behaviour.”

“The Shinzahou?” Maichu’s eyes widened. “What’s one of those, Kikei-sama?”

“Heathen.” Kikei’s lips thinned in irritation. “The Shinzahou is the holy treasure left by the Priestess, in which is sealed an element of Seiryuu’s power. Do you not teach your soldiers anything, Hyoushin? Such ignorance within the Shrine of Seiryuu is unforgivable.”

“I am unfortunately not qualified to instruct my soldiers on religious practice, Kikei-sama.” Hyoushin said ironically. “I am, after all, born a Meihi… I am not of sufficiently Eastern blood to claim faith with the Azure Dragon, and nor do I pretend to understand his ritual. I serve and obey his Highness’s will in these matters, but it would be impertinent of me to presume to know anything about a faith to which I have no ties beyond those of duty to the crown of Kutou.”

“The Shinzahou comes from the summoning ceremony, Kikei-sama, doesn’t it?” Aoiketsu looked pensive. “It’s something the Miko chooses

to confine Seiryuu's power in, when she's granted her three wishes from the God."

"Ah. So one of you at least has some concept of your native culture." Kikei inclined his head in the young man's direction, somewhat mollified by his apparent knowledge. "Yes, boy. As you say. In the case of Yui-sama, the Shinzahou was an earring she wore during the ceremony itself. But it's whereabouts are unknown."

"Shouldn't it be here, though? Somewhere within Kutou — even within this shrine?" Kintsusei asked curiously. "That's what I've heard — that during the uncertainty between my father's death and my own installation, it was here, under the guard of Nakago's lingering spirit."

"Yes, but no more. Nakago's spirit is no longer in these parts." Kikei said with a shrug. "He has passed to the next life, as have his compatriots within the Seiryuu Shichi Seishi. To whom he gave the Shinzahou, or what became of it, noone is quite sure. Under normal circumstances, the Shinzahou *should* be under the guard of Seiryuu's warriors. But as I'm sure your Highness is aware, there are no Celestial Warriors left within Kutou… all were killed in the conflict between Kutou and Kounan eighteen years ago… and I have detected no spiritual activity on their part within this area since the disappearance of Nakago's spirit all those years ago."

"So how are we meant to find it out then?" Maichu frowned. "If you can't tell us where to look?"

"Maichu, you forget yourself before the Priest." Hyoushin said reprovingly, but there was a glimmer of humour in his amethyst eyes at his soldier's bluntness. "I am sure that Kikei-sama has a course of action for us to follow — he is, after all, an expert in the matters of Seiryuu."

"As Hyoushin says, I do." Kikei cast Maichu a glare of dislike, then he nodded his head. "Now we have the scale, I should be able to raise the spirit in the holy flames of this shrine. With the right incantation, I can summon Suiko — at least in vague form. Without the Shinzahou, she won't be of much active use to us, but there is one thing she can do, even in such a weak, summoned state. She can detect the Shinzahou's latent power… and tell us where to look."

"I see." Kintsusei looked thoughtful. "Then we should leave this in your capable hands, Kikei. I take your advice — that we should track down Yui-sama's Shinzahou as soon as we possibly can. It is, after all, a treasure belonging to Kutou and it should be housed here, within the Shrine of Seiryuu."

“Could it be in the possession of a *reincarnated* Seiryuu Seishi?” Aoiketsu asked hesitantly, memory of his conversation with Maichu beneath the cave stirring in his thoughts. “They’d still be young, but even so — is that possible, Kikei-sama?”

“It’s not impossible.” Kikei admitted. “However, to entrust such a thing to someone who was still a child…”

“A child would relinquish it more easily than an adult, I feel.” Hyoushin reflected. “If indeed it is in the possession of one.”

“A Seishi is still a Seishi, regardless of age.” Kintsusei rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “But it’s a line of enquiry, at least. Very well. Kikei, do what you must, and report to me when you know something more about the treasure’s whereabouts. We must push forward, and hope for the best — that the Shinzahou will very soon be within our grasp!”

She had never felt so awful in her whole, entire life.

As darkness fell over Kounan, Hikari pushed back the bedcovers, padding to the window of the small bedchamber, pushing back the heavy, patterned drapes as she gazed up at the sky. Overhead, the moon glittered in a clear sky, but somehow even this didn’t bring her any comfort.

“I’m stuck in some ancient Chinese world that I don’t understand.” She whispered, tears glittering in her eyes as she leant up against the window-frame. “With people who know more about my family than I do. I have no way to get home and… and even if I did, Mum and Dad probably hate me. And… and…”

She swallowed hard, sinking down to the floor as she remembered the expression that had crossed Chichiri’s face as she had made her confession. It had been a mixture of horror and dismay, but there had been something else, too — a haunting, anguished sadness, as if somehow, by speaking so plainly she had dug deep into his heart and paraded his worst fears before him.

And, she reflected bitterly, probably she had. After all, she had more or less told him that his family were going to die.

She buried her head in her hands, forcing the image away, but yet more came into her mind. As she had finished speaking, Meikyo had returned, her mother in tow, and it had been only too clear that the clever, capable Aidou had heard every word of her final speech, although she had made no mention of it in front of her impressionable, innocent young daughter. Five minutes later, the final

member of the family had emerged, sheepish and covered in dust and dirt from head to foot from where he had been hunting small creatures around the farmstead with a stick and very little success, and Hikari's fears had been confirmed.

It *had* been this house. And the children she had seen had been Eiju and Meikyo.

"And they hadn't been much older than they are now." She murmured, dashing her tears away as more fell. "But… but how could that be? Did I… see the future? Is it something… that's going to happen? Did my coming here cause it? I wish I understood what that red light had really been. Did *I* do something, somehow, to hurt them?"

She sighed, feeling wretched as she remembered how kind they had still been to her that evening, despite the dark shadow she had cast over their heads. Aidou had cooked, and both she and her husband had avoided any further mention of her coming to Kounan, but that haunted look had not left Chichiri's good eye and once the meal had ended he had excused himself, saying that he had some things to attend to out in the grounds behind the house. Aidou had watched him go in troubled silence, but she had refrained from commenting, instead instructing her young satellites to clean the table — and themselves — while she arranged a chamber for Hikari to use during her stay.

Being left alone with the young Ri children had almost broken Hikari's heart, for even Meikyo's overwhelming desire to be friendly was not able to fully dispel the image of that silent, sleeping, tiny skeleton, and Eiju's desire to show off had only reminded her with a pang of homesickness of the younger brother she had spent a lifetime fighting with. Yet there was something endearing in Eiju's desire to be a 'proper man', and for the first time since the light had engulfed her in the National Library, her heart had ached for someone other than herself.

Yes, she was stuck in a world, a mile from her own family. But these children were doomed to death perhaps by her coming, and yet they sought only to befriend her, welcoming her into their home as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Unlike the suspicious, wary Shishi, they had embraced her with all their heart, and as the night had worn on, Hikari had found herself with a small, redhaired bundle curled up in her lap, drowsy as she listened to the girl's older brother talk about the bandits of Reikaku-zan and how much he wanted to be like 'Uncle Wolf' and his men in the mountains.

She had almost been glad when Aidou had announced that it was bedtime, and to her surprise, neither child had protested, well-trained to obedience by their mother's firm yet fair hand. At the same time, Aidou had shown Hikari her own chamber, and Hikari, unwilling to face the woman any longer had excused herself, saying she was tired and needed to sleep after the long, trying day she had had.

But with so many things swirling in her mind, sleep was a mile from her thoughts.

She sighed, getting to her feet as she padded back towards the low-slung bed, dropping down on the covers as she settled herself against the wall.

"They're so young. And yet… they were when I saw them… before." She whispered. "The whole world… everything was dead and gone and had been for a… a long time. Was Chichiri there too? If I'd looked further, would I have found a man with a damaged eye, as well as a woman and children sleeping eternal sleep?"

The idea made her feel physically ill and she swallowed hard, hugging her knees tightly to her chest as a wave of self-pity washed over her.

"If I'd never been so stupid as to take the money from Uncle Keisuke's purse, I'd be home and asleep right now." She muttered. "Mum and Dad wouldn't hate me, I wouldn't have left the house and… and I wouldn't have to worry about all of this. It's not fair! Why should I have to deal with all these things, anyway? I didn't ask to come to this world. If Mum and Dad did, well, fine. But I didn't leave Tokyo on purpose. Why should I feel all these things about people who are barely more than strangers to me? They've been kind to me, sure, but..even so… I should be focused on how to get home. Not bothered by some family that I barely even know."

Even before the words left her lips, however, a pang of guilt shot through her heart and she bit her lip, shaking her head.

"But even though they don't know me or what kind of person I am, they've taken me in and been kind to me. I could be out there with wolves or… or mountain bandits." She realised reluctantly. "And they are… friends of my parents, even if it is too strange to get my head around. I… I didn't want to come here, and I barely know where here is. But I can't just ignore it — can I? Those little kids…"

"Pleased to meet you, Hikari-neechan!"

Meikyo's bright, eager greeting echoed in her ears and she

swallowed hard as she remembered the girl's smiling face, the trusting eyes and the small fists thrust out in welcome.

"She's just a baby, really." She whispered. "Eight, she said, but she doesn't look more than five. So innocent, so tiny, so delicate… like something could blow her away. Surely there's something… something that someone can do to stop it from happening? She's not even had half a life yet… and Chichiri… his expression. Both he and his wife… even though they were so kind to me, it was like… I'd polluted their lives somehow with dread and grief because of what I said. I… I can't just run away from that. Can I? Could I go home and forget about all of this? I want to leave — I don't belong here, that's blatantly obvious. And if Mum and Dad aren't already pissed enough at me, they're going to be more so the longer I'm away. If I don't get back quickly, they might decide to disown me completely… if they haven't already. They didn't come after me, after all — neither of them followed me out of the building, so maybe they have."

She buried her head in her hands, feeling homesick once more.

"Somehow I know Chichiri and his wife would never do that to Meikyo or Eiju." She murmured. "It's so obvious, how much they both love their children. It just isn't fair… why does something like this have to happen to a family like theirs? Even if it is a strange world — it sucks! Was that why Mum and Dad never mentioned this place? Because it's full of things that just aren't fair?"

"Hou Jun…?"

Aidou hesitated in the doorway of the home, casting a troubled glance at her husband's tense, rigid form as he gazed up at the stars that glittered across the night sky. He did not respond, and she stepped forwards, resting a hand on his shoulder. At this he reacted, turning to face her as he placed his own fingers over hers, squeezing them tightly.

"I won't let it happen." He said softly, his ruby eye clouded with anguish and determination. "I swear, Aidou. I won't. I can't. I won't."

"You think the girl is right?" Aidou asked softly, and Chichiri hesitated, then nodded his head slightly.

"She's Suzaku's Shinzahou. She's Miaka's daughter. I believe she probably did see… this world as it will be." He said quietly. "And that's why she's here. In this… line of time. Because its somewhere we are. And we're still alive."

Tears glittered in Chichiri's good eye, and Aidou settled herself next to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I have faith in you to protect us." She whispered. "I've always had faith in that, Hou Jun. It's *you* I worry about most."

"*Me*?" Chichiri asked softly. Aidou nodded. Chichiri sighed.

"Hikari said… she saw… three dead people." He said, his voice shaking slightly as he recounted what he had been told. "A woman, and two… children. She didn't… say anything… about…"

He faltered, as the tears threatened to overwhelm him, and Aidou slipped her arm around his shoulders, holding him tightly.

"I won't leave you alone." She murmured. "None of us will. I promise, Hou Jun. You've always promised me that when you do Suzaku's bidding, you come back to us. And you always have. I… I want to promise you that we'll always be here. You're not going to lose another family. We're not going to die. I swear."

"I wish I could be so sure." Chichiri frowned. "But I can't help but worry… that's why the kid is here. Hikari. Suzaku brought her here because something's about to happen, you know? Something big — something that Hikari's already seen. It's her power as Shinzahou that's brought her to this place — her connection to us who should protect her. But I think it's Suzaku too, you know. I think he wants her here… that's why he sent her. Which means I can't bring myself to want to send her back… I don't even know if I know *how* to send her back. And as for you… and the children… *can* that be changed? *Can* you change something that's already come to pass in someone's lifetime? I don't know. I don't know *anything*."

He clenched his fists, anger rising in his expression, and as the tears began to fall, Aidou sighed.

"Don't." She begged. "Hou Jun, with or without this kid being here, I won't let anyone hurt any of us without a fight. And I won't leave you. I swear I won't, no matter what."

Chichiri did not reply, but Aidou felt his fingers caress her thick reddish hair, and her heart clenched in her throat. She knew that his mind had flitted to the people he had lost in the past, and a flash of anger seared up inside of her as she blamed Hikari momentarily for saying such upsetting things. Then she quelled it, feeling ashamed.

"She was as disturbed as he is." She reasoned. "But it's not going to happen. It isn't! I won't let it. Dammit, noone is going to hurt my family if there's something I can do to prevent it."

“Aidou?”

At length Chichiri spoke,

“Yes?” Aidou glanced up, biting her lip as she saw the pain in his expression.

“Will you let me… be alone for a while?” He asked softly. “With the stars?”

“The stars…?” Aidou’s gaze flitted to the sky, and comprehension flooded her bronze eyes as she registered the Suzaku constellations that glittered overhead. She nodded, getting to her feet.

“Of course.” She agreed gently. “But don’t spend too long out here with ghosts, Hou Jun. I meant what I said… don’t worry. It will be all right.”

Chichiri did not reply, and Aidou cast him a troubled look before stepping neatly across to the path that led back to the house. As she stepped into the building, resolution flickered in her heart and she nodded to herself, crossing the main salon and heading up the narrow stairs towards the small attic chamber in which Hikari had been given a simple place to sleep. As she pushed back the door, she saw the young girl was sitting up in bed, her knees hugged to her chest as she stared out of the window.

“Hikari?”

The girl turned, surprise in her eyes, and Aidou came to sit on the end of the bed, the bright moonlight illuminating the pair of them as she cast the stranger a hesitant glance.

“I’m sorry.” At length Hikari spoke. “I didn’t mean to… to cause so many… things. I mean… the things I saw… I didn’t…”

She trailed off, and Aidou sighed, rubbing her temples.

“You saw what you saw.” She said evenly. “I don’t believe you lied, and nor does my husband. But…”

She glanced at her hands, then,

“Hikari-chan, you love your family, don’t you?” She murmured. Hikari started, then, slowly, she nodded.

“I guess I do. Even though they’re mad at me… yes.”

“And you… you want to go back, I know you do. To your world.” Aidou bit her lip. “So what I’m going to say… to ask of you… it’s selfish and it means another mother somewhere is worrying about her

child. But… Hikari-chan… I don't know what else to do."

"Aidou-san?" Hikari looked startled, and Aidou twisted her fingers together.

"Hou Jun thinks that you're here because of what you saw. That somehow you… might be here to stop it happening, if anyone can." She said softly. "That your power as the Shinzahou is important, and that's why you were drawn to our world."

"My power?" Hikari bit her lip. "I don't have any power. I mean…"

She stopped, and Aidou shook her head.

"It's power enough to come to another world, isn't it?" She asked. "I don't know much about this Suzaku magic. I only met your mother and father on one occasion that I remember, and at the time it didn't come to mean as much to me as it does now. But… Hikari…"

She faltered, tears touching her own lashes as she slowly shook her head.

"I'm not afraid of dying." She murmured. "And I would die to defend my children — if I could do something to preserve them I always would. But… but much as I worry about them, Hikari-chan, it… it's Hou Jun I worry for more, right now. After you told him, I saw something… in his gaze. Something that's not been there since we met… since we first became involved in the way we are now. A ghost is haunting him… and I don't know how to take it away."

"A ghost?" Hikari frowned. "What do you mean? I don't understand."

"When Hou Jun was eighteen, he was engaged to a young girl he knew who lived in his village, in the north of Kounan." Aidou said quietly, folding her hands in her lap. "She was someone he'd grown up with — she and another friend and he were all close as any people could be, as far as I can understand."

"So… what happened?" Hikari's eyes widened. "Did she… die?"

"Yes." Aidou agreed. "But not just his fiancee, Hikari. His best friend. His mother, his father, his younger sister. His neighbours — everyone that he had known and loved growing up. There was a flood — a terrible, destructive flood — and it took all of them away. It decimated the entire village… everyone died. Everyone, that is, except Hou Jun — he was protected by Suzaku's power within him. While they all passed on, he had to live with the fact he alone had survived."

Horror flickered in Hikari's expressive eyes, and Aidou nodded.

“He’s spoken to me about it, from time to time, but I didn’t know him right after it happened.” She said slowly. “By the time we met, it was something he was coming to terms with, but it had taken that long — seven or even eight years — for him to feel it was even remotely behind him. The day of the tragedy was the same day he lost his eye, and even now, I think, he bears it as much as a memory of those he lost then as he does just as a part of who he’s become. From what he’s said, I know that the flood destroyed him… for a long time he couldn’t even face up to life. He withdrew from it, just passed from day to day without really living, until he was ready to just give up. Probably, if not for his Suzaku calling, he would have just faded away. He’s told me he became Chichiri to escape Ri Hou Jun’s depressive, suicidal thoughts… I often wonder if I would have ever met him, had it not been for the role the God needed him to play. I suppose I’ll never know for sure either way.”

She sighed.

“My husband thinks very deeply about things. This is both a good and a bad thing.” She added heavily. “He has one of the kindest, most compassionate natures of anyone I’ve ever met, but it can also be a handicap. He broods — and I know that, whether he says it or not, his greatest fear is that something will happen to me and the children, something whereby he’ll be alone again, the way he was after Kouran died. It destroyed so much of his life — it took him so long to move on and accept that it was all right for him — for Ri Hou Jun — to have a life outside of his work as Chichiri. For some time he lived only to serve Suzaku, and to guide your mother and the others in their lives. I had to work so hard to get him to look to his own life… and we… we’re happy. We’ve been happy. I’ve seen him settle and relax and become… such a man, Hikari. Such a father. Such a leader… so much the kind of man I always hoped I’d find, when I was a silly young girl dreaming about future weddings. But this…”

She bit her lip hard enough to taste blood on her tongue.

“It would destroy him all over again.” She whispered. “To lose me, to lose Eiju… especially to lose Meikyo. All these things he’s worked so hard to have… Hikari-chan, I know it’s selfish to ask you this, but I can’t bear for him to go through that a second time. He’s suffered enough… more than enough. He doesn’t deserve… the things he’s done for this country, for other people. He doesn’t deserve to be haunted by tragedy over and over again. So I… I want to ask you not to try and go back to your world. I want you to… to stay here. And… if you can… do something to help, please…”

She closed her eyes, as her tears began to fall onto the bedcovers.

“Please save my husband from his nightmares coming back.” She murmured. “I don’t know what power Suzaku gave you, or how you can help. But Hou Jun believes that’s why you’re here, and I think, if you… if you were to try… if you were to stay, somehow…”

She faltered, dashing her tears away, as she gazed at her young companion. Tears glimmered in Hikari’s own eyes, and the girl swallowed hard.

“What if… it’s my being here… that caused it?” She asked unsteadily. “I don’t come from this world… what if… I did? There was a red light — what if that did all this to your world?”

“The red light is Suzaku’s light.” Aidou shook her head. “And if you saw that, Hikari, then you must… you must be here because the God sent you. In which case…”

She faltered, then,

“Suzaku is a God founded on love and rebirth. On continuing life… on survival, even in the hardest of times.” She whispered. “Such a thing I have come to learn from knowing both my husband and my brother. If the God sent you here, he sent you here to help, not harm. And I’m begging you… with all my heart, please. Please don’t ignore Suzaku’s call. Even if you are missing your home, please… for Hou Jun, for my family… stay in Kounan. Help stop this from happening. I can’t bear the idea that he’ll be on his own again. I think… I think it might destroy him completely, to go through the same fate a second time, and I love him so much, Hikari. If I can do anything to prevent it, I will… please, will you take pity on us and stay?”

“I had no idea so much had happened to Chichiri.” Hikari said shakily. “He’s so… even and he smiles so much… I thought… he doesn’t seem… like anything bad could have happened. Not like that.”

“He is strong, but noone can always be strong.” Aidou reflected. “And his family have become his world in so many ways since Suzaku’s work ended. Hikari-chan, I know you miss your family. Can you, then, understand how I feel — why I’m asking you what I am?”

“I…”

Hikari faltered, then,

“I don’t know if I really do have power. I don’t feel like it.” She said softly. “I don’t have any idea about any of this. This world — everything in it is strange to me. I don’t like it — I’m homesick for the

things that I know and I won't pretend I don't want to go back, even if it means getting yelled at by my Dad for running off like I did. But… but…"

She swallowed hard.

"You really think that my being here could… change what I saw?" She murmured. Aidou nodded.

"If Hou Jun does, I do." She agreed.

Hikari was silent for a moment, then,

"I don't know how." She owned. "But if I can… if I can do something…"

She looked troubled.

"Meikyo is so sweet, and innocent, and gentle. And I can't bear to think of that happening to her." She admitted. "Eiju is the same age as my own brother, but he's not even half the brat Makoto is and I wouldn't wish this on Makoto. And Chichiri… Chichiri…"

Slowly she nodded her head.

"He's been kinder to me than anyone, so far." She owned. "You all have, your family. And I know… if Dad and Mum… if they were here, they… they'd understand. If I stayed… a while. And tried… to help the family of their friend. After all, if… if all the things happened that you said did, I don't… I don't want to go home knowing that he suffered more because I ran away."

She glanced at her hands.

"The truth is I'm pretty useless all round." She admitted. "I'm not smart, or pretty, or even very strong. And I don't feel like I have any special power. But… if I can do something, I… I'll try, Aidou-san. I really will try."

Aidou gazed at the young girl for a moment, then she hugged her tightly.

"Thank you." She whispered. "Hou Jun has always said that Miaka-sama had a kind heart. You must be her daughter, to say something like that."

Hikari returned the hug, eying her companion ruefully.

"I'm not that much like Mother." She admitted. "And I'm sure I'm not half as good as people here seem to think she was at anything. But… well, we don't know how to get me home yet, anyway. So if I'm

here, I might as well try and do something useful for once. Right?"

Aidou nodded, tears of relief glittering on her lashes.

"Then I have faith in you, Hikari-sama, to save Kounan like your mother did. Somehow." She whispered. "That somehow… somehow… you'll make everything turn out all right."

Chapter 13

Chapter Twelve

It was almost dawn.

As Chichiri walked slowly between the rows of flourishing herbs, he gazed across at the horizon where the first rays of the hot Kounan sun were beginning to escape across the darkened landscape. He frowned, realising that he had been outside all night and that, more than likely Aidou would be worrying about him.

“She did tell me not to spend too long with ghosts, after all.” He murmured, biting his lip as he turned his good eye on the stars that were beginning to fade from the sky above his head. “But spending the night with old friends isn’t quite the same thing. Besides… ghosts are sometimes all there are in my life, or so it seems.”

“Chichiri…?”

A voice from behind him made him start and he turned around, surprise glittering in his expression as he registered his young houseguest standing watching him, a thick cape wrapped around her shoulders against the early morning chill and her long, dark hair loose and tousled around her shoulders. He frowned, crossing the land towards her and resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Hikari-chan, what are you doing out and about this early?” He asked gently. “It’s barely even sunrise — are you all right?”

“I guess so.” Hikari nodded her head, meeting his concerned gaze with an earnest one of her own. “I just… I didn’t sleep much last night. I wasn’t… maybe I wasn’t as tired as I thought, or something. But I did… do a lot of thinking. And when I realised you were out here, I thought… maybe I could talk to you. Before Meikyo and Eiju are awake… it’s not something I want to say in… in front of them.”

“I see.” Chichiri’s expression clouded, but he nodded, taking her by the arm and leading her towards a sheltered section of the farmland, gesturing for her to sit down on an old, smooth boulder as he followed suit. “Then if that’s the case, you’d better talk quickly. Meikyo is generally up with the sun, and Aidou and Eiju won’t be much longer behind her.”

“It’s sort of about them.” Hikari twisted her hands together in her

lap. “Chichiri, yesterday I was really rude to you, wasn’t I?”

“Rude?” Chichiri looked startled. “I’m not sure I…”

“About your eye.” Hikari flushed. “I called you a one-eyed weirdo and I was… I guess… I didn’t look past it, at first. It was… hard. I mean, I never saw anyone with that kind of a scar before. It just… took me aback a little bit, and I… I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“You didn’t.” Chichiri assured her. “I told you, I’m more than used to the reaction it brings from people.”

He smiled, though his expression remained troubled. “If that’s why you didn’t sleep, then you can put it out of your mind and go back to bed. It’s all right, you know. I am what I am, and you can’t help being human.”

“No… It isn’t just that.” Hikari shook her head. “Even though I was rude to you, you still took me here, and gave me somewhere to stay. You, your wife, the children — were kind to me. I’m so homesick, and I didn’t realise how much it would affect me, until the night fell and I was alone in my room. But I at least wasn’t on my own in this world… I appreciated that for the first time.”

She bit her lip, glancing at her hands.

“I want to go home so badly, this morning.” She admitted. “Even though I did something… I shouldn’t have done, and made Mum and Dad really, really mad at me. I still… I almost want to have Dad yell at me, because I feel like at the moment I might never see them again. Either of them. Even my brother, who most of the time I hate. I… I never realised how much I’d miss them, if I couldn’t see them all.”

“Then the first thing we’ll do today is find a way to send you home, Hikari-chan.” Chichiri assured her gently. “Don’t worry… I’m sure there must be a way. You came here, so you must be able to go back. It’s just a matter of common sense.”

“No.” Hikari shook her head, and Chichiri looked startled.

“No?” He repeated. “But you just said…”

“I know.” Hikari swallowed hard, and Chichiri was aware of tears glittering in her hazel eyes. “But I can’t. I can’t just go back, can I? I mean, if I did…”

She swallowed again, and Chichiri slipped an arm around her shoulders, hugging her tightly.

“You don’t have to try to be brave.” He said softly. “Miaka was

afraid too, when she came here the first time. You're still just a child, and you don't know anything or anyone here. I understand what your family mean to you — and I mean what I say. I'll find a way to send you home, Hikari… Tamahome and Miaka would want me to do that for you and for them — so you don't need to cry."

"I'm not going home." Hikari said unevenly, and Chichiri eyed her keenly.

"Why not?" He asked gently. "Because you think they're mad at you? Believe me, Hikari, no matter how cross parents get, they never stop loving their children. No matter what happens, your mother and father are worried about you right now. I know Miaka and I know Tamahome. I know how they're probably feeling right now. You have to realise that you are Miaka's Shinzahou — the physical representation of your parents' love for one another. You are something so dear to them that I can't even put it into words — of course they want you to come home."

Hikari was silent for a moment, then she raised her gaze to his, the tears running down her cheeks.

"Maybe." She whispered. "But they'd… they'd also want me to help *you*. Chichiri, last night I said something awful — something about your family that I wish had been a lie. But I know it isn't — I know that what I saw was this village, this house — your wife and your children. I know that something terrible is going to happen to this world, if you're right and that I've somehow come backwards in time. So… so I must've been sent here for a reason. And… and if I just go home… if I just go…"

She faltered, her voice catching in her throat, and Chichiri sighed, touching her cheek gently.

"This isn't your fault." He said evenly. "You only said what you saw… in all innocence. And it must have frightened you, to be confronted with something like that — I can't imagine what you must have thought or felt. Hikari, you owe me nothing."

Hikari shook her head again.

"It's not just you, though, is it?" She murmured. "It's Aidou-san and Meikyo and Eiju and… and other people, too. Everything was dead. Deserted. And for a while I wondered if it was me coming to this world that… that did that. But Aidou-san said… said that it was Suzaku's light that brought me. And… and that I'd come for a reason. So if that's true, I… can't go home. Can I? Because if I do… if I do… you… everything here… will…"

She swallowed.

“Mother and Father would understand.” She added unevenly. “Even if they are worried, in the other world, they’re safe and… and nothing is threatening them. But… Chichiri, you’ve been so kind to me. And even now, you’re still being kind — even though you know that if I go back to my world, it might mean your family… you’re still willing to help me, because I’m homesick. Aidou-san… Aidou-san told me last night, about… about the flood, in your… your past. And… right now… you must be really scared too. It isn’t just me who’s feeling bad… you are too.”

Chichiri gazed down into the earnest, distressed features and for the briefest of instances he almost thought he saw Miaka staring back at him. A faint, rueful smile flickered at the edges of his lips, and he sighed.

“She oughtn’t have brought that into it. It’s not fair, you know.” He said at length. “To make you feel obligated to stay, because of that.”

“But I… I made up my own mind.” Hikari twisted her fingers together. “That even though I feel wretched, I… I’m going to stay. If you’ll let me. You said on the mountain that you might need my help too, and I don’t understand what use I can be to you, to be honest. I don’t feel powerful, and even if I do have something inside me that is, I don’t know how to find it. But… but I’ve never been in a situation where I… I might be able to make that kind of a difference before. And besides… Meikyo is just a baby, really. She’s so little… and so innocent. She and Eiju both are. I don’t… I don’t want to go back and let that… happen to them.”

Chichiri closed his eyes for a moment, gathering his composure. Then he met her gaze with a soft one of his own.

“I’m sorry, you know.” He said sheepishly. “You’re making me a little ashamed of myself, Hikari-chan. That for a brief instant I think my thoughts were verging towards giving up. I haven’t been that Hou Jun in a long time, and I’ve no desire to go back to being him. But you’re right. I am… I am scared. Losing everyone once was almost the death of me. And to have it happen again… Aidou and the children are my whole world in so many ways. I don’t know if I’d be strong enough, a second time. A father should protect his children, and a husband defend his wife, you know? And I felt last night like I couldn’t do that… that it was hopeless to even try, because I didn’t know how. But you don’t know a thing about this world, yet you’re offering to stay here and help fight against whatever it is that’s coming. You *do* have your mother’s spirit, lurking inside of you. And

you make me ashamed of my doubts."

He got to his feet, hauling his companion to hers.

"If your mind is made up, then I won't try and change it." He added. "You're welcome with my family for as long as you need… for Miaka and Tamahome's daughter, my home is always open. And you might think you're useless, Hikari, but you've brought me comfort this morning, you know. Even if you don't realise it — even if you don't understand what a Shinzahou is or what it's capable of. I do — and I really think Suzaku sent you to us to help protect Kounan again. So… if you're really certain you want to stay… we'll fight. We'll fight this as hard as we can. All right?"

Hikari swallowed hard, then she nodded her head.

"All right." She agreed softly. "Because I want… I want to help you."

She blushed, looking ashamed.

"I thought that I had a messed up life, in my world, before I wound up here." She added. "And I guess I didn't… I mean, if I did, I was messing it up on my own, sort of. I did do something I… I shouldn't have done, and even though I thought I had good reasons I… I guess I didn't, really. But I've never felt like I was useful or good at anything. And if I can be useful to you… then maybe… maybe I'll feel better too."

Chichiri grinned, eying her keenly.

"Well, now that's settled, maybe you should get some sleep, you know." He said lightly. "Because if past precedent is anything to go by, we might find ourselves a little busy in the next few days."

"I'm really… not so tired as I thought." Hikari pursed her lips. "Though I would like to… wash. I didn't know… how you do that, in this world, but I feel a bit bedraggled. When I was on the mountain, Anzu-san sort of… washed me, but…"

She flushed.

"I guess I was looking for a shower or something, and then I realised you probably don't have those in this world." She admitted sheepishly. "But I need to wash my hair, and… and… well, that kind of thing."

She glanced down at her attire.

"I look weird, dressed like this. If Arina could see me she'd

probably die laughing." She said with a sigh.

"Arina?"

"My best friend." Hikari said with a shrug. "Back in my world."

"I see." Chichiri's eye twinkled slightly, and he nodded. "Someone else you're missing, Hikari-chan?"

"Yes." Hikari bit her lip. "We were… we were going to go to a party together in the next few days. It was… a guy I liked… was going to be there. And… and I'm not going to get to go now, am I? Although as it stands I'd probably be grounded anyway… for running off the way I did. Mum and Dad may still love me, but they'll still be pretty angry, Chichiri. In some ways, maybe it is better to give them time to cool down before I go back."

"Time tends to move differently in this world from yours, you know." Chichiri reflected. "I've only been there once, when your mother needed Tasuki and my help, during the war we fought with Kounan. I spent no more than a few hours in your city, but when we returned here, six months had passed since the moment we'd left. It was a surreal, disorientating experience — but I imagine that even though the night has passed here, it may not be so for your family back home."

"I see." Hikari seemed to be thinking this over. "But you said… I was last here six years ago, right? And yet it's been fifteen or sixteen years for me?"

"Yes."

"How does *that* work?"

"Like I said, you're the Shinzahou." Chichiri rested his hand on her shoulder gently, meeting her confused gaze with a warm one of his own. "Suzaku's blessed treasure, from the ceremony to summon him. The Shinzahou is meant to be protected by Celestial Warriors, and so that's why you're here. What you saw… the desert land… from what you said, things had been that way for some time. Indicating that we… that everything had been dead for a long while before you entered here. But because of who you are — and *what* you are — you have an instinctive connection to Tasuki and I, and we to you. We are the only surviving Suzaku Seishi in this world… for that reason, you were drawn to a time and a place where we were both still able to protect you. And that's what we'll do, Hikari-chan. You have my word on that. If you're willing to help protect my family — and the families of the people of Kounan, then I'll do everything in my power to

protect you. Tasuki too, when he understands. And when it's all over, I promise that I'll find a way to send you back to your own home. You've my word… I will find a way. No matter how hard it is or how much of my magic it requires. All right?"

"All right." Hikari nodded her head, her hazel eyes glittering with a fresh kind of resolution. "I'll do my best and be brave, and then I'll go home and face Mum and Dad."

"So then it's settled, you know." Chichiri cocked his head on one side. "Once you've had a chance to wash, and Aidou's had a chance to fix you something clean to wear, we'll go to Eiyou and speak to the Emperor. And Reikaku-zan, to see Tasuki, too."

"The… Emperor?" Hikari's eyes almost fell out of her head, and Chichiri nodded.

"Of course." he said evenly. "Your arrival here is significant, and he needs to know as soon as possible."

"But I… I can't meet an… an Emperor." Hikari swallowed hard. "I mean…"

Chichiri laughed, patting her head gently.

"Your mother had no such reservations with his father." He said softly. "Reizeitei-sama is the son of a Suzaku warrior — Hotohori — and *he* was another close friend of both Miaka and Tamahome's. You needn't worry about making a good impression — I'm sure he'll welcome you with open arms. Like him, you see, you're a child of a Seishi. You have celestial blood flowing in your veins too."

"But… an Emperor?" Hikari still looked doubtful. "What do you wear to do that? And how do you act? Do you bow? What do you say…?"

"Don't worry so much." Chichiri eyed her in some amusement, finding his heart lightened by her evident confusion. "Just go inside and find Aidou, ask her to make sure you're clean and dressed to go to Eiyou. I'll see you in an hour or so, when you've had some breakfast… we'll use my magic to get there, so it'll be easier. And then we'll speak to Tasuki and explain to him what exactly it means, Suzaku's mark reappearing at random in recent weeks. I think it probably has something to do with what's been happening in the East, but we'll have to confirm that — and first things first."

"I suppose so." Hikari bit her lip, but she nodded her head. "Okay. I'll go speak to Aidou-san. But… what about you? Did you… stay out here all night?"

“I’ve spent nights without sleep before, and my family’s fate is much more important to me at the moment.” Chichiri said lightly, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about me, you know. I’ll be quite all right.”

Hikari eyed him for a moment, then turned on her heel, heading back towards the house. Her thick dark hair fluttered around her shoulders as she went, almost tripping over the ends of her long cape as she reached the doorway, and despite himself, a chuckle escaped the Seishi’s lips.

“She isn’t quite Miaka, but still, I can see the resemblance.” He murmured to himself, gazing up at the sky where the stars were now no longer visible beneath the brightening blue of the morning sky. “Thank you, Tamahome-kun. I’ll take good care of your daughter, I promise. Miaka, you too. I’ll make sure she’s returned to you unharmed… when Kounan is safe, I promise, I’ll find a way to send her home to you!”

The Shrine of the Scale.

Aoiketsu sat back against the wall, folding his legs beneath him as he glanced at the healing wound on the tip of his finger. It was early in the morning, and across the room, Maichu was still fast asleep, but Aoiketsu had found it more difficult to drop off than his straight-forward friend, his mind still full of their underwater mission and the after events within Seiryuu’s own shrine.

“Is it really true, what the Emperor said? Is it because I have the blood of an innocent? Or… is it something else?” He murmured, flexing his hand, then lowering it with a sigh. “I don’t understand. Hyoushin-sama gave me such an odd look, when we were in the caves. For a moment there, I almost felt like he’d chosen me to come for a specific reason — like it was some sort of a test. Did I pass it or fail it? I wish I knew. But it was… it was a little strange. I’ve never felt like that before… even if it is true, why my blood? Why me?”

He sighed, getting to his feet as he cast a surrepticious look at Maichu. His companion did not stir, however, and Aoiketsu made up his mind, slipping his cape from its hook and wrapping it around his shoulders as he prepared to leave the barracks. It was still early, before the morning bell would wake them and bring them to the courtyard for inspection, and Aoiketsu knew he had time to carry out his errand before he was missed.

The halls of the guardhouse were silent as he made his way out into

the pale dawn light, casting a glance around the palace grounds as he did so. His entire life had been spent in this place, he mused, as he took the turning to go right, towards an area of ground reserved for the memorials of brave, significant men who had fallen in battle for Kutou over the generations. From the moment he had been born, his future as a soldier of Kutou had been settled, but he had never resented this predetermining of his destiny. On the contrary, he knew that, as an orphan with no surviving family, he was fortunate to have had something to hold on to. Many babies born shortly after the war had perished from starvation or abandonment, and he had often thanked the stars over Kutou's sky for the fact he had not been one of them.

As he made his way between the rows of identical, plain military markers, his gaze brushed briefly over each one, scanning the names of men he had never met, and whose stories he would never know. In the furthest corner of the memorial ground were the more illustrious graves of important leaders such as Gi Koyuu, the Shougun's predecessor, although his remains did not lay within it, for he had been ignominiously slain during a squabble of soldiers, the facts surrounding which had generally been hushed up. Beside his, a memorial to the Shougun and the other Seiryuu Shichi Seishi stood, the scales of Seiryuu glinting across the top of the stone as the carved dragon curled around the plot, as if protecting the memory of those who had followed the stars and summoned him to the skies over Sairou.

"But they don't lie there, either. It's just an empty plot, like Gi Koyuu's." Aoiketsu reflected. "I wonder what it was like, for the Shougun. For all of them. Knowing that they were so important to Kutou's future, and yet… being prevented from achieving their final objective. Seiryuu rose in the skies, but yet even he could not protect this world from the power of Suzaku no Miko. When Tamahome slew you, Shougun, what did you think… what did you feel? Did you regret the fact you couldn't come back and finish what you began in this land? I would like to have known you. All of you. Such great people, who fought so hard for Kutou against the southerners. Would it have been different, if there had been no war with Kounan?"

He frowned, turning his back on the stone memorial as another marker caught his eye, and as he quickened his pace towards it, he dropped down a few inches away, reaching across to brush his fingers across the hard, cold marble. This one was unlike all the other plain-stone, military graves, for it had been carved at each corner with delicate, simple blossoms, and as Aoiketsu glanced at it, a flicker of regret surfaced in his young heart.

“Hello, Mother.” He murmured, sitting back on his heels as he gazed at her grave. “It’s been a while since I came here, I know. I’m sorry.”

He reached out a finger, tracing it carefully over the characters of his mother’s name.

“*Kaiga Ruiren.*” He whispered. “Why were you buried here, among the war dead? I’ve never understood… what did you do, that made you significant enough in the Emperor’s eyes to lie here? You died when I was born, I know that. Your death was caused by my coming… you were weak and frail and it was too much for you to bear. You were no soldier, and you bore no arms — so why are you here? Of all people, in all places… why are you buried within the palace walls?”

There was no answer, not even the faintest whisper on the wind, and Aoiketsu’s brows knitted together. For the whole of his young life, this contradiction had plagued him, but no matter how many times he had asked Hyoushin, the answer had always been the same.

“*Your mother died a brave death, and was honoured for such.*” The pale-skinned Meihi had said. “*Do not fixate so on the past, Aoiketsu. It has no relevance to the future*.”

“A brave death.” Aoiketsu frowned. “But you didn’t die in battle. How is giving birth to me a brave death? And why did you come here, anyway? Why were you admitted within the palace? You were the widow of one of Shoukitei’s closest supporters… a man who was the enemy of Kintsusei-sama, and the one who enslaved Hyoushin-sama. You were Kaiga Gin’s widow — I was Kaiga Gin’s son. Why would they take you in — what did you say to them, to make them help you, even in your most desperate time? How did you even *survive* the slaughter of the Kaiga estate? Who *were* you, mother — what gambles did you take to ensure that I would live?”

“You know, stones rarely speak, Aoiketsu.”

At the sound of his commander’s voice, Aoiketsu froze, turning to face the impassive, faintly ironic gaze of the Meihi as he stood a few feet away, arms folded casually across his chest as he surveyed his young junior. As ever, he was impeccably turned out, his thick mane of silver hair bound back in it’s usual warrior’s queue, and not for the first time, Aoiketsu wondered if there was any time of day or night that Hyoushin was not ready and prepared for action.

“I came to see her. That’s all, sir.” He said now, and Hyoushin’s lips twitched into a faint smile.

“So I see.” He murmured. “And to ask her all kinds of questions, too. Does she answer you, Aoiketsu? Is this a hidden power of Seiryuu’s that I have not understood?”

“No. She… she’s not there to answer me anything.” Aoiketsu scrambled to his feet with a sigh, brushing the dust and dirt from his clothing as he shook his head. “But it doesn’t mean I don’t have questions to ask her, Hyoushin-sama. And there isn’t anyone else to ask. Everyone else at the Kaiga estate was slain that day. Only Mother and I escaped.”

He flushed, as he registered a faint flicker in his superior’s expression.

“I mean… well, aside from…”

“From me.” Hyoushin said evenly, inclining his head slightly. “Quite true.”

Aoiketsu frowned.

“Sir… my father… he did terrible things to you.” He said slowly. “If you were… he must have.”

“I believe such matters are none of your concern, Aoiketsu.”

“Perhaps not, but… Hyoushin-sama, it makes me wonder, why *have* you been so good to me for all these years?” Aoiketsu reddened again, realising the impertinence of his question as he danced dangerously near prying into the pale man’s past. “If my father was the monster that everyone says he was, why would you even *want* to help me?”

“It was the Emperor’s will that I teach you, in the way he had ensured I was taught.” Hyoushin said with a careless flick of his fingers. “Does there need to be any other reason than simply Imperial will?”

“No, I suppose not.” Aoiketsu turned back to the grave marker, doubt still in his eyes. “But… Hyoushin-sama, it’s not just that you’ve trained me out of duty. I’m a failure as a soldier — we both know that I can’t face the blood and violence of battle, as weak as I am now. Yet you still have faith in me. As a member of the Kaiga family — why do you keep me in your retinue? I don’t understand… surely that goes beyond Imperial command?”

“Perhaps it does.” Hyoushin agreed. “But then, I imagine I see things a little differently from the way you do.”

“Differently…?” Aoiketsu turned sharply, staring at his commander in confusion, and Hyoushin inclined his head.

“You are a good soldier but you lack discipline.” He agreed. “Mental discipline. The only way to teach you this is to keep you in a position where eventually you will find the courage to face that fact. I cannot train you to overcome your own weaknesses. You must do that yourself. And I will push you, until you do. In terms of your training in other areas, you are as good as any in my retinue. Better than some. It is down to you to defeat these demons of yours — and I have every belief that one day, you will do so. If I continue to push you.”

A faint, strange smile crossed the Meihi’s expression.

“There is very little the mind cannot overcome.” He added. “When it needs to. But this unnatural obsession of yours with the past must go, Aoiketsu. I do not dwell on it and you mustn’t, either. Your mother’s role here was to bring you into the world. She asked for protection for herself and for you, and the Emperor granted her request. That you be trained as your father was — as a soldier of Kutou, and a servant of the Emperor. So it has been — Kintsusei-sama is a man of his word.”

“I see.” Aoiketsu bit his lip, digesting this. “And my blood… opening those things? What about that?”

“Do you also doubt Kintsusei-sama’s opinion, as well as his ability to keep his promises?”

“No… of course not.” Aoiketsu said hurriedly. “It isn’t that. It just seems… strange.”

“There are many things in this world which are strange.” Hyoushin reflected cryptically. “Not all of them are meant to be understood by mere men and women. You should not come here troubling your mother’s spirit, Aoiketsu. She has lived her life, and you should allow her to rest in peace. You belong in the world of the living, and she in the world of the dead — and I imagine you have more important things to be doing today than kneeling in the dirt before a slab of carved stone.”

“Yes… yes sir.”

“Then return to the barracks and prepare yourself for morning inspection. You will be late, if you are not careful.”

“Yes sir.” Aoiketsu saluted his companion, then hurried off across the palace grounds, aware that the Commander was watching him as he made his way back towards his bedchamber and his sleeping room-mate.

“An obligation of the Emperor’s.” He muttered. “Is that what I am?

But even so… even so…"

As he reached the door of his room, however, he stopped dead, his eyes widening in surprise as he registered something his companion had said.

"Trained as my father was." He whispered. "As a soldier of Kutou and a servant of the Emperor. But… but…"

He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry as he realised the significance of his Commander's cryptic words.

"Kaiga Gin was no soldier." He murmured. "He was a rich, priveleged noble of Kutou, but he was no fighting man. That's why the Shougun's army so easily overtook his land and his territory. He was a fat, greedy, lazy man who probably only ever wielded a weapon to cause his servants and his slaves pain. So… why would Hyoushin-sama say something like that? Trained as my father was? What does that mean?"

"Hey, space-cadet, where have you been?" As he opened the door, he found himself accosted by a half-asleep Maichu, who cast him a curious look. "I woke up and you'd gone — I thought you'd finally found a woman and had a night on the town!"

"No. I went to my mother's grave, that's all." Aoiketsu tossed his cape down on the bed, shaking his head as he began to prepare himself for morning inspection. "Nothing else."

"You went to visit dead people at the crack of dawn?" Maichu snorted. "You *are* weird, you know that?"

"Maybe." Aoiketsu frowned, sinking down onto the rough blankets as he eyed his friend pensively. "Maichu… Hyoushin-sama said I've been trained as my father was — as a soldier. What do you suppose that means?"

"What it sounds like, probably." Maichu stared at him as if he was mad. "Why?"

"Kaiga Gin wasn't a soldier. That's why." Aoiketsu admitted, and Maichu's eyes widened, suddenly awake as he realised the implication in his companion's words.

"You mean… you might… not be Kaiga Gin's son after all?"

"I don't know." Aoiketsu sighed. "It… I… I guess I'm starting to wonder if I am."

Maichu frowned, tilting his head on one side as he eyed his friend

critically.

“Well, if it is true, I guess it explains why you’re so damn pretty.” He said at length. “Kaiga Gin was meant to be pug ugly, and even if your mother was the most beautiful woman in Kutou, it’d have taken a lot to dilute that gene.”

“Maybe.” Aoiketsu frowned. “I keep thinking that the Commander — and Kintsusei-sama — they know more than they’re telling me, that’s all. Especially after yesterday. You’re right — it is weird that my blood did what it did, under the water. And… well, Kintsusei-sama said it was because it was the blood of an innocent, whose faith in his Emperor was unyielding and whose hands were unstained by the blood of another. But… do you think… its as simple as that?”

“I have no damn clue, and this early in the morning, I don’t care a lot.” Maichu admitted. “Look, does it really matter so very much if you’re some illegitimate result of a night of forbidden passion? If you ask me, that’s better than being the son of that sadistic jerk — don’t you think so? Or are you going to get all fussy and be offended by the implication you might’ve been born outside wedlock? Because whoever your parents are, they’re dead. So it’s not like it matters any more. It doesn’t affect the fact you’re a soldier here, and there is no Kaiga estate for you to lose because you haven’t got pure blood — it was all destroyed and dragged under crown control after the Shougun’s attack. So… what does it matter?”

“I suppose it doesn’t, except that if my mother did have an affair, my father might be alive still.” Aoiketsu glanced briefly at the rough-edged mirror that hung at the corner of the room, taking in his features with a sigh as he reached up to touch his thick dark hair. “And that… feels a little odd.”

“Well, *you* can spend all morning fussing over that, if you like. *I’m* going to be on time for inspection.” Maichu said brusquely, and Aoiketsu sighed, nodding his head.

“Right. Inspection.” He acknowledged. “Hyoushin-sama warned me not to be late, pretty much — so I guess I’ll have to let this drop for now. He said that the past was irrelevant and I needed to stop worrying about it. Perhaps he’s right. Perhaps it doesn’t matter, anyway. After all, who my father was or wasn’t isn’t going to make a difference to the kind of soldier I am, or help me conquer my squeamishness, is it?”

“Not unless he was as much of a girl as you are.”

“Hey, you said you’d quit calling me that, yesterday!” Aoiketsu

objected, tossing his cape in his friend's direction, and Maichu laughed.

"In the cold light of day, I guess I'm reneging." He teased. "It's just too easy, that's all. And besides, before you don armour, with your hair all over the place, you could be a girl. I'm not kidding. You're way too pretty to be a soldier, and that's a fact."

"Maichu!"

"Inspection, remember!" Maichu exclaimed, as Aoiketsu lunged in his direction. "Unless you want to be assigned clean-up duty as punishment!"

"All right, all right. But seriously, one of these days I'll whip you good and proper and you'll realise who the better soldier is." Aoiketsu said darkly.

"Yeah, yeah, so you keep saying." Maichu shrugged. "So long as you keel over within feet of blood, I don't suppose that it'll happen any time soon."

He shrugged, shooting his companion a playful grin. "After all, you wouldn't be Aoi if you didn't play the wimp whenever the red stuff was involved, would you? Bastard baby or not, you're still Aoiketsu, right? So stop letting it get to you and get ready. Hyoushin-sama is right. What's past can't hurt you. Right?"

"Suppose so." Aoiketsu nodded slowly. "All right. I get it. I'm done."

He fastened his breastplate, casting his reflection another glance in the mirror and absorbing the smart soldier who stared back, even as he tamed his long black waves into a more practical style.

"Ready for inspection, just like any other day." He murmured, more than half to himself. "All right, Maichu. Let's go."

"There's no sign of her anywhere."

As Keisuke sank down onto the sofa in his sister's front room, he cast her a troubled look, slowly shaking his head. "Miaka, I've been all over town. I've even called Tetsuya and he and Yui are on alert, in case she shows up there. If she's not at her friend's house… I don't know where she could've gone. On a train, into the night — but you said she didn't have any money with her?"

"I told you. She's gone into the book." Miaka whispered, wrapping

her dressing gown more tightly around herself as she met her brother's gaze with a haunted, scared look of her own. "I know it, Keisuke. Both Taka and I do. We felt it, when she went in. I can't explain how or why, but I know that's where she is. I know it!"

"All right, Miaka, calm down." Keisuke rubbed his temples. "I hear you, but I don't understand how it's possible. After the last time…"

"But she's the Shinzahou — you're not listening!" Miaka was verging on frustrated tears now, and Keisuke sighed, holding out a hand to pull his companion down beside him.

"Taka will be back soon. Take it easy." He murmured. "I know how you feel, and what you think has happened. But even if she is the Shinzahou — even so, if she didn't know about the book's legend, she wouldn't have gone looking for it."

"Maybe it came looking for her, like it did Mayo." Miaka said softly, as Keisuke's wife entered the room, bearing a tray of hot tea as she set it down on the table between them. "She didn't know about the legend either, but it grabbed her anyway."

"But I chose to go in there." Mayo reminded her sister-in-law, taking a mug and sitting opposite. "I'd learnt something about it, before I took that decision. And we saved Kounan, that time. Between us, Miaka, you and I did. Didn't we? We saved it properly."

"You, me *and* Hikari." Miaka corrected. "Yes. But…"

She sighed.

"I know that's where she is." She repeated. "I *know*, Mayo. I know."

"Meaning what? That the book world is in trouble again? That Hikari's some kind of new Suzaku no Miko?" Keisuke looked disturbed. "But it must have been years since you went there, in that world. Mustn't it?"

"A new Miko…" Mayo bit her lip. "But I already filled that role, in Miaka's absence. Would it happen again so soon? Wasn't it meant to be… the end of things? Or at least, within our lifetimes — wasn't it meant to be? After all, wasn't there a long time between Okuda Takiko going into the book, and Ousugi Suzuno, and then Yui-san and Miaka…?"

"Not so very long between Takiko-san and Suzuno-san." Keisuke admitted reluctantly. "They were childhood acquaintances — in the book world, a lot of time had passed between the enacting of the Genbu and Byakko legends. But in this world, it can't have been so

very long. Takiko-san was seventeen when she returned to this world and was slain by her father. I think Suzuno-san… judging by her age when we met her — she must have been a child of eight or nine then. And of course, Yui and Miaka went into the book together."

"Which messed everything up, didn't it. Because of Nakago, everything got messed up." Miaka said bitterly. "And we couldn't save Kounan right away, and people died, and… I don't want Hikari to have to go through all of that. It's been almost sixteen years since you took her into the book, Mayo. It could be… a new legend. Couldn't it? *Couldn't* it?"

Keisuke sighed, then he spread his hands.

"Fine." He said softly. "For now, you get some sleep. We all need to… it's late and none of us can do much more tonight. But tomorrow morning, Miaka, Taka and I will go to the library first thing and we'll find the book. All right? We'll see if there's any way Hikari has gone into it, and if she has… if she has…"

"Taka is *not* going back in there." Miaka said sharply. "He promised me — last time he was almost killed!"

"But if Hikari is there… to bring her back?" Mayo asked softly. "Miaka, if you're right, it may be the only way."

"I…" Miaka buried her head in her hands. "I know. I just… I wish *I* could go, not him. That's all. But… it makes me afraid to lose both of them, if that really is where Hikari has gone. There might not be any Celestial Warriors left to protect my daughter, Mayo… she might be alone and abandoned and when I remember what happened to Yui when she first arrived in the book world…"

She trailed off, tears glittering on her lashes, and Keisuke reached out to squeeze her hand.

"Tomorrow we'll find her, Miaka." He said softly. "Whatever it takes. Tomorrow, we will."

Chapter 14

Chapter Thirteen

"You expect me… to go in *there*?"

Hikari gazed up at the palace with a mixture of apprehension and disbelief, biting her lip as she gauged her companion's serene expression. "It… it's huge, Chichiri — are you really sure I won't be, you know, arrested or something? I mean, I… never met royalty before, and I really don't think that he'd care about me… even if I am the daughter of a friend of his father's. Let's go back to the village, huh? I feel… weird, standing here, and…"

"Stop babbling, you know. People will think you're strange." Chichiri said softly, mischief in his red eye as he took her by the arm, leading her towards the young guard on sentry duty. "I told you, it's all right. You don't need to worry. In your world, this might seem a strange thing to do, but you're not in your world now. Things are a bit different, where Suzaku no Miko and her family are concerned. In your world, Miaka and Taka-kun might simply be your average married couple but here in Kounan they're two of the most respected people in recent history."

"Really?" Hikari sent him a doubtful look. "It seems kind of… strange to me."

"I know, but trust me." Was Chichiri's simple response. "Let me explain to the guard, and don't worry, all right?"

"Chichiri-sama!" As they drew into the young guardsman's line of sight, he bowed his head, offering Chichiri a respectful smile, then repeating the gesture to the Seishi's bewildered companion.

"Morning." Chichiri said cheerfully, twitching his frayed *kasa* as he cast the man a warm grin. "I hoped we might see the Emperor. I know it's short notice, but yesterday Reizeitei-sama gave us indication that we'd be welcome to come as soon as we had anything to report, and well, I have something rather important to relay to him… something which I think might interest him more than a little, you know."

"Yes sir." The guard saluted, bowing his head again as he stepped aside. "We have been instructed that you are to be granted entrance at all times. The Emperor is at the Shrine of Suzaku this morning, paying his weekly respects to his late father, lord Saihitei. If you would like, I

can run and bring him a message? Or… as you will it, you might attend him at the shrine?"

"We'll go there. You have plenty to do, I imagine." Chichiri said decidedly, his ruby eye twinkling. "Thank you. We'll be out of your way now. Come on, Hikari. You heard the man — we're going to the Shrine of Suzaku."

"The what of who?" Hikari frowned, as she felt a tug on her arm, pulling her away towards one side of the palace grounds. "Wait, Suzaku is the name of your phoenix thing, isn't he? And shrine… like a temple? Is that where we're going? Some religious place?"

"Yes. In a manner of speaking." Chichiri agreed. "Although it's also the place where a dear friend of mine is interred, so to me it's more than just a place of worship. Over the years, Hikari-chan, it's become quite a focal point for those of us born to do Suzaku's will. In fact, I believe it's somewhere *you've* been before, too — though of course, you wouldn't remember."

"I did?" Hikari looked non-plussed. "You mean… when you say I was here before?"

Chichiri nodded.

"Yes. That's right." He said. "With your mother's friend Mayo."

"I still don't get how Aunt Mayo could've brought me here before I was born." Hikari frowned. "It makes no sense. A lot of things really don't make much sense here, you know."

She sighed, glancing down at her attire as she almost tripped on her long skirt, grabbing out for Chichiri's other arm to steady herself. "Including the clothing! Women really dress like this and manage to get through the day without killing themselves?"

"Mostly." Chichiri chuckled. "You are like your mother in that respect, then? I seem to remember Miaka-chan had a tendency to be clumsy, from time to time."

"Only when I'm forced to walk around in a tent." Hikari grimaced. "I thought what that Shishi girl was wearing was bad, but now I'm starting to sympathise. At least the way she was dressed, she could move around."

"I think you look very pretty." Chichiri said mildly. "And besides, you *are* here to see the Emperor. Tasuki might get away with coming to the palace in bandit attire, but we won't push it on your part, all right?"

“I guess so.” Hikari acknowledged with a sigh. “All right. I’m sorry. It’s just not really all that comfortable. I wish I had my jeans with me… at least then I’d be able to move.”

“Jeans?” Chichiri blinked, eying her for a moment. Then he shrugged, smiling wryly.

“Your world is just as strange.” He reflected. “And we’re here. Are you clean and tidy, Hikari-chan? You’re about to enter a holy place, after all.”

“I don’t think Aidou-san would have given me much choice, after you sent me off to find her this morning.” Hikari reached up to touch her hair self-consciously. “She seems to take those things seriously, and I didn’t really get much say in the matter. I guess I thought bathing was less important in your world, since you don’t have showers or running water as far as I can see. But Aidou-san kinda showed me I was wrong — I don’t think I’ve ever been quite so clean in my life. And my hair… feels funny up like this. I always wear it in a braid… is it really normal, to style it this way?”

“For a young, unmarried village girl, yes.” Chichiri agreed. “And although we’re going to reveal to Boushin who you really are, Hikari-chan, it’s probably not a good idea to broadcast it far and wide that you came from another world. One thing I’m pretty sure of is that you aren’t here to be Suzaku no Miko in your mother’s stead. If you were, I’d be able to feel the life forces of the other Seishi pulsing with Suzaku’s spirit, and I can’t. They’re alive, sure enough. But they’re not being called to arms… so whatever you’re here to do, it’s not to gather the seven stars of Suzaku.”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.” Hikari sighed, gazing up at the clear blue sky. “And who’s Boushin? I thought we were here to see Rei… whatever it was sama?”

“Oh. Yes. Reizeitei-sama.” Chichiri looked sheepish. “I’m sorry. Boushin is the name his mother gave him — and I’ve known him since he was a small boy. Reizeitei-sama is his imperial name — and I should do better remembering it, I’m sorry. It’s just hard, sometimes, when you remember the small child clutching his teddy-bear.”

He cast Hikari a sidelong glance.

“A teddy-bear your mother left with his father.” He added. “As a keepsake, when we left for Hokkan to find the Genbu Shinzahou.”

“My mother gave an Emperor a *teddy-bear*?” Hikari stared, and Chichiri grinned.

“I told you, there were no false airs and graces between the Miko and the Emperor, in those days.” He said nostalgically. “And I’m sure you’ll find Bou… Reizeitei-sama is keen to befriend you, too. In your world, you might be a gulf away from an Emperor’s attention. But in this one… being the daughter of Lady Miaka and Tamahome is almost as good as being an Imperial son.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Hikari looked doubtful, and Chichiri spread his hands.

“You’ll come to realise it.” He said lightly, placing his palms against the door of the shrine. “For now, let me explain to his Highness who you are and what you’re doing here — so far as I’m able to do that.”

“All right.” Hikari nodded, and Chichiri pushed open the door, leading her through the ante-chamber to the inner sanctum of the shrine. He paused, then knocked gently against it.

“Reizeitei-sama, I’m sorry to disturb you, but it’s something quite important.” He said carefully. “It’s Chichiri, of the Suzaku Shichi Seishi, and I’ve brought someone to meet you. Someone who has a connection with you and with your father’s past — and who may hold a key to what’s going on in the Eastern lands.”

“Chichiri?”

The door swung back, and Hikari drew breath sharply, staring up at the young man who stood before her, momentarily robbed of speech as she took in his handsome, elegant features and the bright, clever golden eyes that sparkled with life and energy. He was dressed in formal, dressy robes which, in any other circumstances she might have found amusing, but yet there was something in the man’s bearing and countenance that made her realise this was the Emperor Chichiri had spoken of, and that there was nothing remotely funny about him.

He cast her an interested look, then offered Chichiri a warm smile.

“I had not expected to see you again so soon. I feel honoured.” He said, in his gentle, dignified voice. “I was paying respects to my Lord Father — would you join me and say a prayer for his soul?”

“Of course, as ever.” Chichiri agreed cheerfully. “Hikari, you can come too. It won’t hurt you to pay respects to someone who your mother held in high esteem, after all.”

“Mother?” Reizeitei’s eyes widened, and he cast Chichiri a startled glance. “Chichiri-san… what do you mean? This girl was known to my father in some way?”

“She’s the daughter of Tamahome and Suzaku no Miko.” Chichiri said casually, as if he was announcing something of little importance. “It seems fitting that she should come pay her respects to Lord Saihitei, on her parents’ behalf.”

“The daughter of…” Reizeitei trailed off, lost for words as he stared at the girl anew. Then he seemed to remember who and where he was, looking abashed as he gestured towards the statue of the golden phoenix.

“Then by all means, her prayers will also be most welcome.” He said gravely.

Hikari stared at the statue, awed by it’s overbearing, glittering presence, and her eyes were drawn to a small golden plaque that glittered beneath the beast’s claws. Although she could not make out all of the inscription, she recognised the character for ‘star’ and the one for ‘Emperor’ and she realised this marked the grave of the man Chichiri had told her about — the Suzaku warrior Hotohori, who had once been a close friend of her parents.

Feeling self-conscious and awkward in her long, heavy skirts, she followed Chichiri’s lead, kneeling down and putting her hands together as she closed her eyes. Surrepticiously, however, she cast a sidelong glance around her from beneath lowered lashes, taking in the profile of the young king who knelt only a short distance to her right.

He was, without doubt, the most handsome man she had ever seen.

“And he’s an Emperor. Arina would die if she knew.” She told herself, biting her lip as she took in the dignified aura that the young man exuded. “Are Emperors meant to be cute as well as rich and powerful? I never really paid attention to it before. He doesn’t seem old enough to be ruler of a country — he can’t be much older than me, if his Dad and mine fought together with Chichiri and my mother to raise this Suzaku creature. But somehow he seems… so grand.”

“Hikari-chan, you can get up now.” A hand on her shoulder told her that her companions had finished their devotions and flushing red at having been caught daydreaming, she scrambled to her feet, looking sheepish and awkward as she attempted to gather her wits. Chichiri offered her an amused smile, then cast the Emperor a glance, nodding his head slowly.

“Yes, Boushin-kun. Just like you, Hikari is a child of a Seishi.”

“But… Miaka-sama and Tamahome no longer reside in this world.” Reizeitei cast Hikari a thoughtful, faintly awed look, and Hikari was

struck with a jolt as she realised the Emperor of all Kounan was eying her almost as if she was some kind of divine being. “Has she come from there, Chichiri? If so, I understand your coming… this is news indeed!”

“There are a lot of things I need to tell you, Heika, and I’m not sure I have a lot of time to do it in.” Chichiri admitted. “Here seems as good a place as any, however, since it’s fairly private. Yes, Hikari has come from Miaka’s world, but she’s more to you and I than just the daughter of old family friends. Hikari is something else to Kounan — she is the embodiment of Miaka and Tamahome’s love for one another. If you remember, six years ago, a girl called Mayo assumed the mantle of Miko to carry out Miaka’s wishes and protect this world against the dark forces tearing it apart. Do you recall? You were a boy of twelve at the time, so I’m sure that you do.”

“Yes. I remember Mayo-sama quite clearly.” Reizeitei’s brow creased slightly as he nodded his head. “But…”

He faltered, as comprehension flitted across his face.

“Are you telling me… this girl… is the baby she brought to Kounan? That *this* child is Miaka-sama’s Shinzahou — the blessed treasure of all Kounan?”

“You are as smart as your father, and as quick to understand.” Chichiri grinned, nodding his head. “Precisely that, Heika. And it seems to have been her power as Shinzahou which brought her here to us. She appeared around Reikaku-zan, and Tasuki conveyed her to me to handle. I was going to try and send her home, but… it seems that there’s a specific reason for her to be here. And considering that fact, Hikari-chan has agreed to stay in Kounan a little longer. I think, Heika, that her presence is important. And more, we’re going to need her.”

“Hikari.” Reizeitei said softly. “Your name means light… it is a fitting name for one blessed with Suzaku’s divine power.”

“I… I don’t feel very divine, your… your Highness.” Hikari found her tongue, shaking her head. “Actually I’m sort of confused.”

“Which makes two of us.” Reizeitei admitted. “Chichiri — you sound like you have grave news to impart to me, yet you’re unsure quite how to do so. Will you forgive me if I ask you to be direct? I have a feeling it is not something I wish to hear, yet as Emperor of Kounan, I think I must know it as soon as possible.”

“Yes, I think you must.” Chichiri sighed. “Heika, when Hikari first

appeared in this world, it was a deserted wasteland. You might not be aware, but the world in which Miaka and Tamahome now live moves at a slower pace of time than this one — normally, therefore, it should be many years into our future for someone of Hikari's age to be able to enter here again. This, I believe, she did… but that the time concurrent with her own was dead. Everything… everyone. Not only that, but it had been so… for quite some time."

A flicker of pain surfaced in his ruby eye.

"She is quite sure she saw my own family among this world of death." He added slowly. "And that is why she has decided to remain in Kounan. Because she seeks to help prevent whatever caused such a thing to happen… to my family and to all of the people in this country."

"Death? Deserted… wasteland?" Horror flickered in Reizeitei's golden gaze. "This is… Kounan's future? Hikari-san… has come from Kounan's future, as an omen? A warning… that we are all doomed to die?"

"I think she's come here to try and stop it." Chichiri shook his head. "That Suzaku's sent her here now she's old enough to be here. She's fifteen, Heika, the same age that Suzaku no Miko was when she came to Kounan the first time. I'm sure that Hikari is Suzaku's emissary — and that she was drawn back from that time to this one because she has a connection to Tasuki and I. As Shinzahou, her destiny is to be protected by the Suzaku Shichi Seishi. And that is our duty, as surviving warriors — to ensure no harm comes to her."

"I see." Reizeitei bit his lip, and Hikari glanced at him, wondering absently how he had possibly understood Chichiri's horribly confusing explanation. "So in fact, she has come to use her holy power to protect Kounan somehow?"

"Yes. I think that's the case."

"And this, you believe, relates to the unsettled East?"

"Probably." Chichiri inclined his head. "Right now, though, we're still uncertain of many things. I still have to discuss this with Tasuki, and I have someone else I need to consult, too — someone who, I hope, will give us a clearer idea of what we're facing. It'll have been a while since I've paid her a visit — but with any luck, she won't hold it against me."

Hikari glanced up sharply at this.

"Someone else?" She asked curiously. "Who?"

“You’ll see.” Chichiri said with a grin. “It’s easier to show than tell, you know?”

“So you are the daughter of Suzaku no Miko.” Reizeitei turned his beautiful eyes back towards Hikari, offering her a smile and as he did so, Hikari felt herself flushing beneath the intensity of his gaze. “That you have come to Kounan in our time of need… I thank you, Hikari-sama. You are as welcome within this place as Chichiri and Tasuki — as the Shinzahou of Suzaku, this shrine is somewhere you belong even more strongly than I do. You are indeed well-named — if you are to bring light to an otherwise difficult situation.”

“I… I don’t know about that…” Hikari faltered, and Chichiri chuckled.

“Poor Hikari is still working out how to walk in long skirts.” He said, amused. “But it’s all right, Heika. I’ll do my best to help her learn about her place in this world, and what it means to be the Shinzahou. To be able to shift through time like she has shows she has a lot of magic sealed up inside of her — even with all my spiritual power, that’s something I’m not able to do. I imagine that once we’ve unlocked it, Hikari will be a valuable ally for you and all of Kounan. She just needs a little time to adjust.”

Hikari blushed, and Reizeitei sent her a smile, for a moment his expression lighting up with a flicker of mischief and personality behind the sobriety of his demeanour.

“I see.” He said softly. “Yes. I suppose it must be very different, in the Miko’s world.”

He tilted his head slightly, eying her pensively.

“My father loved your mother very dearly.” He said reflectively. “Before he met my mother, and fell in love with her in the manner of people who are able to love for life. I am grieved he is not here to see you — I know it would have brought him pleasure to see the child whose future existance he died to preserve.”

“Died to…?” Hikari stared at him in alarm. “What do you mean?”

“Hotohori-sama — Saihitei-sama — was killed in battle against Kutou, the country whose border lies to the East.” Chichiri said softly. “He sacrificed his life against their Shougun, Nakago — a man of Kutou’s God Seiryuu, as well as a man of decidedly evil intentions. Many, many people died at Nakago’s hand, before your own father put an end to his atrocities by bringing him down. Hotohori-sama’s life was given bravely — in an attempt not only to protect *this* world, but

also to try to prevent Nakago from entering *your* world — and from slaying your mother and father. He took Miaka's safety more seriously than he did his own, in the end. His duty as Emperor and as Seishi to protect drove him to the very end."

"I see." Despite herself, Hikari's heart clenched as she looked at Reizeitei with new eyes. "I'm sorry. It must have sucked… I mean, it must have been very bad, to lose your father like that."

"He passed away before I was born." Reizeitei said evenly. "But in some respects, that made it harder. Still, he did not leave us right away. He did come to the palace, when I was a baby, as a spirit to protect my mother and I from demons."

A smile touched his lips, lighting up his expression.

"It was your father who enabled my father to hold me in his arms." He added. "I remember it, although I was only two years old. I remember it most vividly… the time my father held me, and told me to make him and Kounan proud."

His eyes glittered with tears, but he held his composure, spreading his hands.

"And now you are here to help Kounan, in your parents' stead." He added. "Just as your parents had, your heart must also be good, Hikari."

"I… I don't know." Hikari felt self-conscious. "I'm not sure it's that good. But I guess… I guess we'll find out, won't we?"

She sighed.

"To be honest, I don't know much about my parents when they were in this world. In fact, until I turned up here and had a sword jabbed in my back, I didn't even know it existed." She admitted. "Mum and Dad have never talked about it… I guess I'm starting to see why. I mean… there's no way I'd believe it, without having seen it for myself. But it means I… I don't know a lot about your father, your Highness, or any of the other Suzaku warriors. Or even about Kounan and the things my parents did in the past. I don't know anything at all, to be honest. And I don't know how to be this Shinzahou thing, either."

"But I'm sure, in Chichiri's capable hands, that will all soon be rectified." Reizeitei said comfortably.

He bent to the foot of the bird statue, reaching behind the creature's glittering leg as he extracted something, dusting it off and

then holding it out to her. Tentatively Hikari took it, her eyes widened as she realised what it was.

“But this is a photograph!” She exclaimed. “You mean you have *cameras* in this world?”

“I don’t know what manner of magic produced it, but it belonged to my father, and it was given him by your mother.” Reizeitei said with a smile. “I know it was important to him, because he was holding it when he died. Mother said that all of Suzaku’s warriors once had a picture like it. Chichiri — you probably do, too.”

“Yes.” Chichiri agreed, coming to peer over Hikari’s shoulder at the battered, battle-scorched image. “It was taken before we left for the North Country — the last time the eight of us were ever together as living, breathing souls. Only a few weeks later we were on the mountain where Nuriko died… this was really the last time we were a proper, complete team.”

“So this is… all of the Suzaku warriors?” Hikari asked, pursing her lips as she gazed at the damaged image. “Chichiri, what’s wrong with your face? You look like a kitten — and what’s up with your eye? You don’t have a scar!”

“I was wearing a mask, you know.” Chichiri laughed. “I used to do that a lot, back then.”

“A mask?” Hikari sent him a funny look. “To cover up your eye?”

“Yes and no.” Chichiri shrugged. “It’s complicated… but I haven’t worn it in years. Ri Hou Jun doesn’t wear a mask — his wife tends to object if he does, you know?”

He grinned playfully, and Hikari pursed her lips ruefully, acknowledging to herself that Aidou probably would have something to say about something as odd as the*kitsune*mask.

“That’s the mountain bandit. Genrou.” She observed, turning her gaze back to the picture. “Right? And that… oh God. That… that’s my… my mother. And… and… Father? Only he looks so… his hair is…”

She faltered, glancing at Chichiri in confusion.

“He looks a little… different.” She admitted.

“That’s because Tamahome was originally from this world.” Chichiri said simply. “But he was reborn in your world so he could stay with Miaka. Suzaku’s spell had a few modifications, you know… that’s all. I guess you could say that’s the real Sou Kishuku, in that

picture. And the man you know — is the new, improved Sukunami Taka… you know?"

"Confusing." Hikari groaned. She bit her lip, her gaze flitting over the other three grainy, smiling faces.

"That must be the late Emperor, lord Hotohori." She decided. "Rei… Reizeitei-sama, you look… a lot like your father, you know."

"So I have been told, although I doubt I am quite so handsome as he was. He was quite a legend, in his lifetime, so I've been led to understand." Reizeitei said with a grin.

"And the other three? The man, the woman and the young boy?"

"Myou Juan — 'Mitsukake', Chou Ryuuen —'Nuriko' and Ou Doukun — 'Chiriko'. Except Nuriko was a man, you know."

"No way." Hikari snorted, peering at the picture. "That's a *guy*? Okay, he's not wearing a dress exactly, but… he looks more like a girl than my mother does! Are you seriously telling me that's a *man*?"

"Yes. All of Miaka's Seishi were men." Chichiri nodded. "Appearances are deceptive, Hikari — didn't we already have that conversation?"

Hikari glanced up at him, pinkening as she remembered her initial reaction to her companion's scarred eye. She sighed, nodding her head.

"I guess so. I'm sorry." She said slowly. She glanced at the picture once more, then held it out to the Emperor, who took it, returning it reverently to its secret place.

"Now I look at the picture beside you, I can see you have your mother's likeness in your face." He said pensively. "You truly are the child of Lady Miaka. Kounan is indeed blessed."

"And now I've seen… that, I guess I have to believe Mum and Dad were here, once." Hikari chewed down on her lip. "And that all of this stuff you've been telling me really is real."

"I thought you'd already come to that conclusion, Hikari-chan?" Chichiri looked startled, and Hikari spread her hands.

"I suppose I hoped that maybe it was still a misunderstanding." She admitted. "But I guess now I know it wasn't. So… so I guess that means I really am meant to be here, for some weird reason."

"Well, it's probably time we did find out more about that." Chichiri agreed. He inclined his head in the Emperor's direction, offering him a

smile.

“Reizeitei-sama, with your permission, I want to assist Hikari as much as I can in whatever she needs to learn to help Kounan. And whatever she needs to do to be successful here.” He added. “I have somewhere I need to take her, and then I think it’s likely that Tasuki and I will have to confer on the best course of action. Do we have your blessing, to act as we see fit in the name of Suzaku?”

“As ever.” Reizeitei nodded his head. “As you already said, your duty is to protect Kounan and Suzaku’s Shinzahou. Even an Emperor cannot intervene in the will of the God.”

“Then I guess Hikari and I have somewhere else we need to be.” Chichiri looked thoughtful, eying his young charge reflectively. “Hikari, say your goodbyes to the Emperor… I think it’s time we moved on to the next place. And then, maybe, things will begin to get a little clearer.”

The inside of Seiryuu’s shrine was silent, flames flickering with blue light in the sconces around the walls as the Priest carefully prepared his spell. In the dim, uneven light, the Emperor of all Kutou and his faithful Meihi guardian stood deathly still as Kikei undertook process upon process, incantations and spells falling from his lips as he cast his hands over the central purifying flame.

As the fire spat and glimmered with life, Kikei’s expression seemed to relax, and he nodded, as if confirming something to himself. Then, very gently, as if touching something more precious than life itself, he slipped his fingers into the blue jewelled casket, his skin brushing against the holy scale for the first time.

There was a glimmer of blue flame, as his touch was repelled, and he frowned, eying it for a moment. Then he nodded again, hovering his hand mere inches from its surface as he muttered another ancient spell.

As the Emperor and his companion watched, Suiko’s relic glittered and hummed with light and energy, hovering for a brief moment from within its safe, secure resting place as sparks of ethereal electricity seemed to flare out all around it, connecting with the central flame. As soon as the two made contact, the fire flared a vivid, azure blue, and from within the depths, the faintest outline of a shape began to be visible.

“Kintsusei-sama, step forward.” Satisfied with his work, Kikei turned, beckoning to the Emperor who, momentarily awestruck had to jerk himself from his daze, obediently moving closer to the flame as if

he was not ruler of Kutou but a young boy being guided by an experienced, indulgent master. Hyoushin's eyes narrowed slightly, his gaze flitting between the flame and his Emperor as if he suspected some danger, but as his hand hovered near the hilt of his sword, Kikei offered him a faint, derisive smile.

"You too, Hyoushin, unless you are scared to face the power of Seiryuu." He said softly. "Kintsusei-sama is not afraid, but if you are, you do not have to observe this."

"I have no fear of spells or incantations, Kikei-sama." Hyoushin said evenly, coming to stand level with his companion. "Whether woven by Priests of Seiryuu or the divine Gods themselves."

"Kikei… what is that?" Before Kikei could retort, Kintsusei's voice interrupted them, his tones faltering as he gazed upon the brilliant blue flame. "In the fire… there's… something there."

"Not something, my Lord. Some*one*." Kikei shook his head. "Through the powers invested in me as Priest of the Divine Seiryuu's Shrine, I have summoned the spirit of Suiko, the Guardian mage of Kutou to assist my Emperor in his quest for Kutou's peace."

"The spirit of…" Kintsusei's eyes widened. "But… then Suiko *is*… a person?"

"Suiko is a powerful magical splinter of power, left behind in this one scale belonging to Seiryuu himself." Kikei shook his head. "But she assumes the form most acceptable to those who she is created to serve and protect. She is not as strong as she once was, it's true — but there is still enough energy in the scale to project a weak, faint image of her in human form. Of course, with Yui-sama's Shinzahou, we'd have enough of Seiryuu's power to give her physical form away from this place… as it is, we will only be able to communicate with her as a prisoner of the flame, and she will not be able to use her own magic while in this unstable state. However…"

"Then what use is she to us, Kikei?" Hyoushin asked, irritation flecking in his violet eyes. "If she cannot use her divine magic, is she not more than a ghost in a flame? You had better have spent your energies resurrecting the Shougun's ghost. At least he had spiritual power upon which Kutou's future could have depended."

"Kintsusei-sama, must this heathen be present at such a defining, significant moment?" Kikei sent his Emperor a beseeching look. "Hyoushin may have been cultured and educated in the ways of the East since you brought him into your service, but it really is not appropriate to have one who denies Seiryuu's divinity so blatantly

step so deep within his shrine."

"I am Kintsusei-sama's bodyguard. For this, I must be willing to go where he does, and I do." Hyoushin's expression did not falter for a moment. "Including here. If Seiryuu minds my presence, no doubt he will be sure to inform me of his displeasure."

"Kintsusei-sama!" Kikei exclaimed, and the Emperor glanced up, clearly startled from an almost hypnotic reverie.

"Kikei? Why are you shouting?"

"Kintsusei-sama, is it necessary for Hyoushin to be in the Shrine while Suiko is being awoken?" Kikei asked wearily. "He persists in mocking the God's magic at every turn."

"You are mistaken, Kikei. I don't have any reason to mock Seiryuu." Hyoushin bowed his head slightly in the Priest's direction. "I realise that he is a spiritual being beyond the comprehension of man or beast. It is merely the ritual and those who carry it out… that is where my contentions lie. And as for my presence here, so long as Lord Kintsusei's person may be threatened, I will not leave his side. Assassins can strike in the darkest of places, Kikei-sama. As I'm sure you need no reminding — after all, you are one of the few who survived the Shougun's purging of the palace, eighteen years ago."

There was no threat in Hyoushin's tones, nor in his demeanour, but the icy glint in his violet eyes seemed to make the Priest bristle, as if a personal insult had been cast.

"Lord Kintsusei!"

"Both of you, stop it." Kintsusei seemed to remember where he was at that point, holding up his hands. "This is not the place for a personal disagreement nor a debate on spiritual matters. We have more important, pressing things than your religious differences — on one thing we are all agreed. That the peace of Kutou matters more than anything else. And that whatever ends we must follow to achieve that… must be entirely explored."

He turned, casting Kikei a smile.

"I have faith in your spells, Lord Priest." He said softly. "As I do in Hyoushin's loyalty, and his ability to protect me. He and you both are welcome in my company, whether together or apart. I will not send either one of you away to placate the other, not when I need the both of you to help me in my endeavours."

"I have no complaint to make, Lord." Hyoushin said softly, a flicker

of amusement in his amethyst gaze at this. “As you say, Kutou’s peace is the most important matter at present.”

“Then maybe I can finish my explanation of Suiko’s chief purpose within the flame of Seiryuu.” Kikei sounded impatient, shooting the Meihi a dark glare, which was returned by an interested, placid smile. “As I was saying, she cannot use her divine powers while she is a spirit trapped in magic fire. But she can tell us something valuable nonetheless. Seiryuu’s magic calls out to her across this world. The whereabouts of Yui-sama’s Shinzahou… is something that she will know beyond all doubt.”

“And with the Shinzahou, we can restore her?” Kintsusei’s eyes widened. “I see. Then your spell has merit indeed, Kikei.”

“My Lord, with the power of Yui-sama’s Shinzahou, do you intend to try to raise Seiryuu himself?” Hyoushin asked softly. Kintsusei glanced at Kikei, who shook his head.

“Seiryuu cannot be summoned so simply.” He said with a disdainful smirk. “Although I wouldn’t expect *you* to know such technicalities, Hyoushin. To summon the Beast God, there must be a Priestess from another world. We have no such thing. And we would have the power of only one Shinzahou. When Yui-sama raised Seiryuu the last time, she used the combined power of two.”

“Then… aside from raising this Suiko guardian spirit, is there a purpose to us obtaining the Shinzahou of Seiryuu?” Hyoushin again directed his question at his Emperor, who frowned.

“Kikei believes so, and I have faith in his expertise.” He admitted. “Even though we have no Miko. Seiryuu’s Shinzahou is the start, Hyoushin, that’s all. If we could track down the Shinzahou belonging to the other Beast Gods… maybe, with their combined powers, and their combined Guardian magic… we might be able to generate something powerful enough to protect Kutou in the way our neighbours have been protected.”

“Kutou lives under a curse.” Kikei said frankly. “Because the legend of Seiryuu no Miko occured long before its appointed time. For some reason, unknown to any living soul, the Mikos of Suzaku and Seiryuu existed in this world alongside one another, and provoked war between the lands. Bloody conflict followed, and neither land was able to be saved as a result. However… since that time, Suzaku no Miko managed, through some dark art of her own, to convey peace to Kounan. Even I do not know by what method she brought this about. All I do know is that Suzaku no Miko’s legend was the true one — the

one destined to fall at the time at which our troubles began. And since Seiryuu no Miko should not have entered this world yet, Kutou cannot find its divine peace."

"A curse." Hyoushin's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, and then, slowly, he nodded his head. "Yes. This I can understand."

"All the present suffering in Kutou can be traced back to the years leading up to the conflict between Seiryuu and Suzaku no Miko." Kintsusei sighed. "The truth of it is that both sets of Seishi were engaged not in protecting and preserving their lands as peaceful places but instead were defending them and fighting an almost holy war."

"During this time, Seiryuu no Miko's Shinzahou was misplaced." Kikei agreed. "It's my belief that part of Kounan's peace is because Suzaku no Miko somehow invoked the power of her Shinzahou and that this now resides somewhere within the Southern Lands. Since it's well travelled rumour that Suzaku rose in the skies over the Miko's world, it was somehow possible for her to send there not only her holy treasure but also a Priestess through which to enact the summoning of the Beast God in Kounan for the first time. And since Suzaku had not appeared in this world before, this shadow Miko was able to make the wish for Kounan's peace… a happy outcome that seems denied to the people of Kutou."

"So we gather the Shinzahou." Hyoushin said slowly. "And then you believe we will be able to rectify this?"

"With power like that, noone would dare to cause trouble for Kintsusei-sama again." Kikei said simply. "But small steps first. Lets focus on our own treasure, for the time being."

He turned to the flame, muttering a final incantation as he spread his hands before the blue glow, and both Hyoushin and Kintsusei watched as slowly but surely the image of a woman became more and more clear in the flickering, dancing fire. In this spiritual state she seemed both divine and ethereal, her eyes glimmering with azure energy, and thick sapphire hair winding around her shoulders in curls that rather resembled waves upon the seashore. At her throat, a pendant glittered with the image of the beast God, and as she became more and more visible, she seemed to stir from a deep stupor, glancing around the shrine at the chamber's occupants as if seeing them for the first time.

Kikei bowed his head, holding his hands out to her in a gesture of peace.

“Suiko, Guardian of Kutou, the servants of Seiryuu summon you.” He said softly.

For a moment, there was no response. Then, as the girl’s eyes seemed to flare with a fire all of their own, she let out a peal of faint, ghostly laughter, an amused smile twitching at her mouth as she tilted her head coquettishly to one side.

“Aged priest, you grovel before me as if I am a genie, ready to grant you wishes.” She murmured, her voice barely more than the whisper of the tide. “Who are you, who seeks to speak to Suiko, Guardian of Seiryuu’s land of the East?”

“Kikei, Seiryuu’s servant and Priest of the Shrine.” Kikei’s head remained bowed. “And the Lord Kintsusei, Emperor of Kutou, the land which lives beneath the protection of the Azure Dragon’s power.”

“I see.” Suiko’s eyes glimmered thoughtfully. Then she nodded.

“Step forward, Emperor of Kutou.” She said gently, holding out spectral hands to beckon to him and Kintsusei started, then obeyed her, reaching his own fingers to hers tentatively. For the briefest of moments, they brushed skin. Then she pulled her hands back with a mischievous laugh, the sound rippling around the chamber.

“You seem uncertain, Koutei-heika.” She said lightly. “Do you truly wish for my help?”

“I seek peace for Kutou, Lady Suiko.” Kintsusei admitted. “And if you can help me in that regard, then yes, I seek your assistance most desperately.”

“And your associate?” Suiko’s eyes flitted to Hyoushin, who eyed her for a moment, then bowed his head slightly. “He seems to be even less sure than you are, Koutei-heika.”

“Ignore him. He’s a fine soldier, but he’s also a heathen and unwilling to learn the ways of Seiryuu.” Kikei said disparagingly, shooting Hyoushin a glare which was returned with an even, icy glance of disdain. “Suiko-sama, it is my Lord Emperor and I who seek your advice. We wish to find the treasure of the Priestess of Seiryuu, in order to restore you to full form. And…”

“And you believe I might know where it is?” Suiko asked softly. Kikei nodded his head, and she offered him another, playful smile, reaching out ghostly fingers to pat him on the head. “You are wise, Lord Priest. My strength is failing, but I can tell you something of its whereabouts. The magic of the Shinzahou is stronger than the magic within my heart at this time… it calls out across the land and even in

this state, I am able to hear it's cry."

"Is it within the Eastern lands, Lady Suiko?" Kintsusei asked eagerly. "In the land Yui-sama came to protect?"

"No, the treasure is not within these borders." Suiko shook her head. "It lies to the north, on a direct line from here, but deep into the land of the snow. Within mountain country. It is guarded, however, by those who bear the blue mark of Seiryuu's constellations — both before and beyond the grave. And it is to them you must apply to claim the treasure belonging to Seiryuu no Miko."

"Blue mark?" Hyoushin murmured. "Such as that the Shougun had on his brow?"

"She means the mark of a Seishi." Kikei frowned. "But… Lady Suiko, tell me how this is possible? All the Seiryuu Seishi are dead… killed in battle against Kounan. How can the Shinzahou be protected by any of them? I don't understand!"

"I cannot tell you what I do not know." Suiko flicked her hand carelessly. "I have neither the strength nor the inclination to learn more about it. The Northern lands hold little interest for a spirit of the sea — frozen water doesn't suit me at all."

Before any of them could react, her image blurred and faded back into the flame, and the light which had enveloped Seiryuu's scale dimmed, until the relic dropped back into its case, silent once more.

"Very helpful." Hyoushin remarked succinctly. "I presume by Northern lands, she does mean Hokkan?"

"I imagine that she must." Kintsusei sighed. "But Kikei is right, Hyoushin. If all of Seiryuu's men are dead… how can the Shinzahou be in the protection of those before and beyond the grave? It makes no sense to me either."

"Perhaps one or more of Seiryuu's warriors have been reborn?" Hyoushin suggested. "It is not impossible, is it?"

"They would be very young." Kintsusei looked doubtful. "Even if they had been reborn immediately after their deaths…"

"But not impossible." Kikei admitted reluctantly. "Though I'm surprised the idea came from you, Hyoushin."

"It was put into my head by an innocent conversation between some of my men." Hyoushin said evenly. "We have no way of knowing whether or not our Seishi have been reborn, however Kutou still lies in a precarious position. And unless I am much mistaken, the

legend of Seiryuu's constellations do state that when the land is in peril…"

He trailed off, and Kikei's eyes narrowed.

"For one who pretends to know nothing, you seem to know a lot." He said softly. Hyoushin's eyes flickered, and he bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"I listen and I learn, Lord Kikei." He replied calmly. "That is all."

"So if we assume at least one of Seiryuu's Seishi has been reborn, what are they doing in Hokkan?" Kintsusei wondered. "As warriors of Seiryuu, shouldn't they be in Kutou? It doesn't make any sense."

"Unless their families fled to avoid the civil war." Hyoushin suggested.

"True." Kintsusei admitted. "I suppose that is a possibility — that they left Kutou and crossed the border into Hokkan."

"Even so, how are we going to track them down?" Kikei demanded. "They might not know who they are, or what they're protecting. In which case… how will we know? How can we find something that's in a land the size of Hokkan? This country is large enough, but the northern territories are three times bigger at least!"

"May I suggest by use of a map, Lord Kikei?" Hyoushin said evenly, dry humour in his amethyst eyes. "That is, after all, how most people find their way anywhere."

"If you're just going to be flippant, Hyoushin…" Kikei began, but Kintsusei held up his hands.

"No, I told you both once." He said mildly. "We're on the same side. Besides… something has occured to me. Something I remember someone once mentioning… something… little by little it's coming back to me. That not all of the Kutou blessed were originally born in Kutou. Perhaps because of the curse you mentioned, Kikei — the fact they were summoned to life too soon to properly carry out the legend and protect Kutou. But… I'm almost certain… aside from Nakago, born of the Hin tribe, there was another… one born in the northern lands. Ashitare… the wolf-man."

"Ashitare." Kikei's eyes widened with comprehension, and slowly he nodded his head. "Yes. I believe you are right, Sire. In fact, I'm certain of it. Such a monster of a man — in a literal sense — I'm sure that no such people have ever lived within Kutou's borders. Yet there are legends of wolf-demons and other monsters of the snow along the

Hokkan-Kounan border and deeper into the northern mountains."

"Then perhaps we are seeking the reborn spirit of this wolf-man Ashitare." Hyoushin rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Tell me, Priest — is there any way to track the spirits of Seiryuu's Seishi?"

"If I had such a method, I would not have tried to raise Suiko so soon." Kikei snapped.

"Then my Lord, perhaps if *I* was to travel to the North… I might have some luck in tracing this Shinzahou through old-fashioned methods." Hyoushin turned to the Emperor. "With a few of my men, I'm sure that we could learn something."

"Do you even know what it is?" Kikei demanded, and Hyoushin shrugged.

"Not clearly, but I can be told." He said simply. "And I believe of all men I am best suited to undertake this mission. After all, in times past, my people migrated from the snowlands to Kutou in search of warmer climates. I am not as troubled by the cold as men born of other tribes or peoples… and I am more than willing to undertake the journey, with my Emperor's permission."

"I think that would be the best course of action." Kintsusei looked relieved. "Yes, Hyoushin, do that. Take a group of men and go North. Yui-sama's Shinzahou is a teardrop earring she wore during the summoning ceremony in Sairou — but I'm sure you would recognise it, if you came into its vicinity."

He glanced at Kikei.

"Kikei, will you also ensure that Hyoushin has a charmed mirror to take with him on this trip? If Suiko should be able to give us further information, we should be able to convey it to him as soon as possible, and Hokkan is a day's ride at the very least. It would be simpler to keep in contact via your spiritual magic."

"Yes, my Lord." Kikei sighed, sending the Meihi a look of dislike. "If you think we can trust someone so ignorant of Seiryuu's magic with something so important."

"I would trust Hyoushin with my life, Kikei." Kintsusei said frankly. "Then it is decided. Select your men, Hyoushin — I want you to depart as soon as is possible."

"Yes, Lord."

"And Hyoushin?"

“Yes, Kintsusei-sama?”

“Take Aoiketsu with you.” A flicker of meaning flared in the Emperor’s dark eyes, and the Meihi nodded, understanding dawning on his own face.

“I already had intended to do so, my Lord.” He agreed lightly. “The boy has acquitted himself well enough of late, deserving of a trip away from the palace. And besides, it will be good experience for him. I had already decided to include him in the party, if you had agreed.”

“Then it’s settled.” Kintsusei smiled. “I have faith in you, Hyoushin… and the Shinzahou’s soon and safe return to its homeland.”

“So *now* where are we?”

As they exited Chichiri’s unusual hat, Hikari raised a hand to her head, faintly nauseous by the second transfer in such a short space of time. Glancing around her, she realised that they were atop what appeared to be a mountain, although she quickly registered that this was not Reikaku-zan. Indeed, it did not look like it was even a part of the same world, with so many contrasting colours and lights glimmering from every peak and crevasse she could see. For a moment she just drank it all in, spellbound by the view unlike anything she had ever seen. Then she cast her companion a questioning look, taking in the pensive, almost nostalgic expression on his scarred face.

“Chichiri? Where have we come to now? Is this somewhere else in K… Kounan?”

“Not exactly, you know.” This time Chichiri glanced at her, offering her a smile. “But somewhere just as significant. It was a home from home for me for three years or more when I was training to be Chichiri, you know — and your parents both came here too, on several occasions. This is Taikyoku-zan — and if I was to say we were as close as possible to the gates of Heaven, I wouldn’t be telling you lies.”

“The gates of…” Hikari stared at him blankly, and Chichiri chuckled.

“You know, when you give me that look, you really do remind me of your mother.” He said absently. “But I’m perfectly serious. Besides, in a sense, I wanted to test you as well, Hikari-chan. Not that I doubted you — but I know you doubt yourself. But you see the landscape, don’t you? Colours and flowers and everything beautiful,

for miles around?"

"Yes…" Hikari bit her lip. "Like some kind of wild acid trip or something. Why?"

"Because only those who have good hearts can come here." Chichiri said gently. "And whatever your doubts, Hikari, you have a good heart. Though I was sure that would be the case — after all, you *are* Miaka and Tamahome's daughter."

"I wish you wouldn't call Dad that." Hikari admitted.

"Tamahome?" Chichiri eyed her keenly, and Hikari nodded.

"Yeah. It makes it feel like I don't really know him."

"I suppose I see what you mean." Chichiri reflected. "I'll try and remember, though it's hard to do, you know. To me he's always really been Tamahome… Even when he was here under the name Sukunami Taka, Tamahome seemed to roll off all of our tongues more easily. But I'll try and remember."

"Thanks." Hikari offered him a faint smile. "So is this place… the place where the person we came to see lives?"

"You catch on fast." Chichiri nodded. "The person we've come to see is the controller of this world — the hermit, Taiitsukun. Well, she's a lot more than that, really, but… I won't confuse you too much right away. For the time being, it's probably better you think of her as some kind of guide — she's able to see out all across the lands and I'm sure that she'll know more about the current situation than we do. She's like that, you know… and she's always been helpful, in the past."

"Thank you, Chichiri. It's nice to know that even after all this time, you remember your old mentor."

A voice came from behind them, startling both, and Hikari turned, letting out a yell as she jumped back behind her Seishi companion. Hovering in front of her was the oldest, most wrinkled and decidedly un-pretty woman she had ever seen, her grey-white hair swept up under a grandiose headdress and her sagging, unflattering form wrapped in elegant robes which somehow added to the surreal nature of her appearance. Bright, beady eyes glinted from within a sunken, jowled face, and Hikari swallowed hard, inwardly deciding that as much as Chichiri's scar had repulsed her on their first encounter, this woman was several times as bad.

"Hikari, stop that." Chichiri said reprovingly. "It's rude, you know — at least say hello."

“Well, well. Sukunami Hikari.” The old woman cast the schoolgirl a thoughtful look, then she smiled, the effect sending fresh shivers down Hikari’s spine. “Suzaku no Shinzahou… I did wonder how long it would be before you showed up in this world. The portents have been there for a while… that Suzaku’s power needed to be in this world, instead of in Miaka’s. And at last, Miaka’s realised it, and sent her Shinzahou back to the Shijin-Tenchishou.”

“I don’t think Miaka had a lot to do with it, to be honest.” Chichiri admitted. “I think Hikari sort of found her way here on her own.”

Hikari gazed up at the being doubtfully, nodding her head.

“It wasn’t on purpose.” She said faintly. “Did you… really know my mother?”

“Yes, and she was just as hopeless on first encounter as you, my dear, but I’m sure that like her, you have much to gain from your time in Chichiri’s company.” Taiitsukun said comfortably, nodding her head. “Both he and Tasuki — flame-headed fool though he is — will no doubt be able to teach you about this world, and help you unlock the magic Miaka and Suzaku sealed inside of you.”

“You know why we’re here, then.” Chichiri surmised, and Taiitsukun’s expression became grave. She nodded, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

“There is a great danger coming from the East. Bad omens — bad signs.” She said softly. “You know that since the war with Kounan, Kutou has never truly been at peace, Chichiri. And you’ve experienced and survived first hand the trauma war can bring between two principle nations of this world. Kutou’s Emperor Kintsusei is not a black-hearted man — but he *is* a desperate one, and he seeks to bring peace to his land, no matter what the cost. Even now he has begun to embark on a path which, if not prevented, could spell the end of not only Kutou, but the entirety of this existance. He is already dabbling in power beyond his control or his understanding, and not all of those who surround him are men to be trusted.”

“And that’s why Hikari is here?” Chichiri pursed his lips. “I see. That makes some kind of sense, you know. I’ve felt things coming from the East for a while now, and both Tasuki and I have seen our characters appearing without us willing them to do so. What about the others, Taiitsukun? Will they be re-awoken too?”

“You and Tasuki have been chosen by Suzaku as the Shinzahou’s guardians, as I think you have already surmised.” Taiitsukun shook her head, her jowls wobbling and making the bewildered Hikari feel

faintly queasy. “There is no need for the others to be disturbed from their new lives. For fifteen years, Tamahome and Suzaku no Miko have been guardians of the Shinzahou. But now she’s needed here — and so it’s your turn to play babysitter for a while.”

“Yes, I’d realised that much.” Chichiri agreed, sending Hikari a smile. “But I’m prepared to do that, you know. But Taiitsukun, Hikari… when she came here… she saw…”

“I saw death and devastation.” Hikari murmured. “Is that really going to happen to this world?”

“That, I think, may well depend on you.” Taiitsukun said softly. “Sukunami Hikari. And how seriously you take your promise to Chichiri and his family, to stay and help in the fight to save Kounan. There are, after all, many trials along the way for you to face. It won’t be an easy task to undertake.”

Hikari bit her lip.

“Meaning I might never get to go home?” She asked hesitantly.

“I already promised you that you would, so you will.” Chichiri assured her. “One promise in exchange for another, Hikari-chan.”

“But you *are* needed here, that is for certain.” Taiitsukun said soberly. “Chichiri, have you ever heard a legend about four splinters of divine magic embedded within hidden shrines in each of the four lands?”

“I’m not sure.” Chichiri looked surprised. “I may have done, but it’s been so long…”

“Well, I’ll refresh your memory.” Taiitsukun’s eyes twinkled. “Relics left by the beast Gods on their first coming to this world. Before Mikos, before Shinzahou, these shards of magic were left as part of the Beast’s covenant with the people of each land — the promise of protection in return for faith. Tenkou abused these relics and drained their power somewhat during his reign of terror sixteen years ago — but they still exist, and still contain enough magic to potentially be an ally or a threat, depending how they are used. If someone was to possess both Shinzahou and relic, they might restore the guardian spirits to their full strength.”

“And this is what the Emperor of Kutou is up to?” Chichiri’s good eye narrowed to a near slit as he absorbed this information. “He’s stealing Shinzahou… or at least, that’s what he intends to do?”

“Yes.” Taiitsukun agreed. “And relics, too, no doubt. With the

power of all of these, he may even be able to raise the Gods themselves over Kutou's skies."

"But for that, doesn't he need a Priestess from Miaka's world?"

"If he claims all the Shinzahou, Chichiri, he would *have* such a Priestess." Taiitsukun's gaze rested once more on Hikari, and as the girl understood the implications of the woman's words, she paled.

"He wants… to get *me*?" She whispered.

"Don't look so scared. That's why Tasuki and I are here — to protect you, you know." Chichiri said easily. "Besides… Taiitsukun, do Kutou know what form our Shinzahou takes?"

"Not yet. And they may not come to learn it for some time." Taiitsukun shook her head. "Time enough, perhaps, for Hikari to discover her true strength."

"And as for Suzaku's relic? Suzaku's guardian spirit — what do we do about that?"

"For now, nothing." Taiitsukun reflected. "At present Hikari hasn't enough power to unlock Suzaku's guardian spirit Hisei, or to revive her. She doesn't understand enough about who she is for that, yet."

"But you *can* tell us where that relic is?"

"Hidden closer to home than you might think — within the bowels of Tasuki's Reikaku-zan." Taiitsukun smiled. "But as I said, you cannot — or rather, *must* not -attempt to reach it yet. It would put it in grave danger of being stolen, if you were to unearth it before Hikari is ready to use her power to bring Hisei to life."

"Then what can we do?" Chichiri questioned. "Presumably grab the Shinzahou and/or the relics before Kutou do — but… where do we even begin?"

"Kintsusei of Kutou has already sent a party towards Hokkan in search of their own Seiryuu Shinzahou." Taiitsukun said simply. "It seems that it's in the possession of two of Seiryuu's Celestial Warriors — before and beyond the grave, to quote their guardian Suiko."

"So they already have *their* relic?"

"Yes, although as yet she's only been awoken as a vague spirit — a ghost in a flame summoned by the magic of a Priest. She's told them to head North… which seems a wise course of action for you, too."

"I don't understand any of this." Hikari confessed. "What are we doing? This Hokkan place — wasn't that where you said one of your

friends *died*, Chichiri? Why do we need to go there…? Do *I* have to go, too?"

"You need to stick with Tasuki and I, and it's us who will be going, so yes." Chichiri said with a nod of his head. "As for why, to find the Shinzahou belonging to Seiryuu before the Kutou men do — you heard what Taiitsukun said. If their Emperor unites all of these, then…"

"But without me, surely, he can't?"

"Let's not take the gamble, Hikari-chan. If we left it to that, you might find yourself a target." Chichiri said wisely. "And certainly they'd want to know more about who you were and why you were so important to Kounan. Remember what I said about acting incognito — noone who needn't know *should* know that you're even from another world, let alone Suzaku's holy treasure."

"I guess." Hikari bit her lip. "All right. I suppose so."

Chichiri turned his attention back to the strange, elderly figure, a thoughtful look on his face.

"Hokkan, for *Seiryuu*'s Shinzahou." He said slowly. "Not Genbu's?"

"No. Not yet. It's Seiryuu's that they seek."

"I see." Chichiri hesitated, then, "You said before and beyond the grave… Taiitsukun, is it possible that the Shinzahou… the earring Yui wore in the ceremony to summon Seiryuu — is it in *Amiboshi*'s possession? That even though he lost his memories, he might yet be the one entrusted with care of the treasure?"

"Your mind is still sharp, Chichiri." Taiitsukun smiled. "Yes. Amiboshi is indeed in possession of Seiryuu's Shinzahou. And he is not as oblivious to his past as he might be, considering the proximity he has to Seiryuu's treasure. Besides, one other thing has jogged his memory, too. Remember, I said that the Shinzahou was in the care of *two* Seiryuu Seishi. You must take care, on this trip — Amiboshi is likely to be reasonable, however…"

"However." Chichiri frowned. "I'm guessing that means that *Suboshi* is also somewhere in the vicinity. You said before and beyond the grave — Amiboshi is alive and Suboshi is dead, but as brothers their bond surpassed all of that. Is that what you're telling us? That Suboshi and Amiboshi *both* guard Seiryuu's Shinzahou and that, considering Suboshi's past history, we shouldn't count on convincing him easily that we should have it?"

“Especially if he comes to realise that Hikari is Tamahome’s daughter.” Taiitsukun sent Hikari a meaningful look, and the girl frowned.

“Why should that matter? Who is Suboshi, and who is Amiboshi?” She asked. “Seiryuu Seishi, like Chichiri is a Suzaku one? But if this Suboshi is dead, what can he do to us?”

“He is a spirit, which means he’s not as dead as he should be, and he hasn’t been reborn like my old comrades all have.” Chichiri said briefly. “Suboshi and Amiboshi were twins, and both were boys of about your age now when the war broke out between Kutou and Kounan. Amiboshi… escaped it. He didn’t want to fight. But Suboshi… they couldn’t be more different.”

He bit his lip, then,

“Suboshi was the one who killed your father’s family, Hikari-chan. In this world, at least. Sou Kishuku’s entire family were murdered by him and his Ryuuseisui. Taiitsukun is right. He’s potentially a serious threat, especially to you.”

Hikari swallowed hard.

“Murdered?” She whispered, remembering fleetingly her father’s cryptic comments in the conversation she had overheard. “By a boy of… of fifteen?”

“Suboshi had a lot of hate, and also a lot of love, which can ultimately be just as destructive.” Taiitsukun said sadly. “Love for his brother, love for Seiryuu no Miko. Unlike Amiboshi, he’s had no chance to grow up or grow out of those emotions — he is as he was then, a troubled, hot-headed boy of fifteen, trapped in a warp of time. And I imagine his love for both will keep him guarding the Shinzahou — unless you can find a way around it.”

“Well, we’ll have to try.” Chichiri said briskly. “Hikari-chan, we’re going now. Back to Reikaku-zan. We’ll tell Tasuki the situation, and then we’ll make plans. Dangerous or not, it looks like we’re going into the north… and hopefully, to find the Seiryuu Shinzahou before the people from Kutou!”

:::Densetsu No Hikari :::

-Owari —

Author’s Note: How To Find Part Two of this Story.

I can't believe I have to write this AN, because back when I uploaded this story, nobody had this problem, but I've had a few anonymous reviews from readers apparently confused where this story goes after this. Since they're anon reviews, I can't PM a reply, which makes it even more frustrating.

When I wrote this story I was in the habit of splitting long tales at logical points to make separate stories. It's a practice I haven't really continued in my Bleach stories, which are true volumes in their own right, and don't end on cliffhangers. However, with both Tenchi and Fushigi Yuugi long tales, there were separated parts. This one is in five parts. The first is named for Hikari, the rest after the Four Gods in sequence, depending on which God's land/seishi/shinzahou is most prevalent during the tale.

So, Anon reviewers-san-tachi, the second part of this story is the Shinzahou Chronicles Vol 2 (Seiryuu no Teki). Then Vol 3 (Byakko no Yokan), then Vol 4 (Genbu no Takara) and finally, Vol 5 (Suzaku no Unmei). I thought that was clear from the overall title, but I guess not. Anyhow, from here, read Seiryuu no Teki for the next part of the story.

Please, no more anon reviews asking where Part Two is and if there will be one ;) Though I'm no longer writing Yuugi fic, this is one of the projects I did finish ;)